



Society and Change in Bali Nyonga *Critical Perspectives*

Edited by Jude Fokwang & Kehbuma Langmia



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Society and Change in Bali Nyonga: Critical Perspectives

Edited by
Jude Fokwang & Kehbuma
Langmia



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Langaagrp@gmail.com

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Preface

The initiative for this volume began three years ago largely from informal discussions among scholars of Bali descent inspired by the need to build on the legacy of previous authors who have contributed considerably to our knowledge of Bali Nyonga. As editors, we formulated the main ideas and selected the final articles from over a dozen submitted abstracts. We were truly delighted by the tremendous interest showed by prospective contributors when the call for submission was first circulated. The precursor to this was the creation of a forum for Bali scholars; balischolars@yahoo.com, intended to exchange ideas on decisive issues affecting the Bali homeland. According to Kehbuma Langmia, its founder and moderator, the Bali scholar e-group aimed to adduce intellectually informed opinions and analyses on topical issues affecting Bali citizens and the general scholarship on the peoples of Bali Chamba descent. It is therefore fair to state that the existence of this forum has served as a major impetus towards the production of critical knowledge on Bali and the Cameroon grasslands.

During the past 50 years or so, the production of knowledge on Bali Nyonga has been dominated by expatriate scholars, for which we are eternally grateful. Beginning in the late 1970s, Bali scholars began producing knowledge about their own society, contributing to detailed descriptions of customary practices on the rites of passage, mortuary rituals, coronation procedures, Chamba migration history, the political system of Bali Nyonga, amongst many other themes and topics. Many of these works brought insightful and much needed insider perspectives, complementing those of seasoned authors who had written extensively about Bali society such as Elizabeth Chilver and M. D. W. Jeffreys. We believe that scholars are worth their salt only when they produce and impart knowledge that is relevant and accessible. It is our intention to make ourselves and knowledge both relevant and accessible through the publication of this volume. We are deeply indebted to many of the scholars whose dedication and deep interest in the Bali cultural universe have facilitated our own exploration of academic sources on Bali.

Over two decades have gone by since an edited volume was published on Bali Nyonga. Many Bali scholars are of the opinion that a follow up is long overdue. Many are also determined to explore mechanisms through which the production of knowledge on Bali and the Cameroon Grasslands can be sustained and continued. The attainment of these objectives is beyond the scope of the present publication. However, it is worth stating that this volume is a worthy step in the right direction. It aims to provide cutting-edge analyses of cultural change in Bali as well as inspire a new kind of scholarship in the Cameroon Grasslands – championed by indigenous intellectuals. We are certainly aware that many expatriate anthropologists have made a career producing knowledge about the Cameroon Grasslands – one of the most fertile and vibrant areas to carry out “traditional” ethnographic studies. We also feel there is something innovative when such scholarship draws on and cross-fertilises with knowledge produced by indigenous or native scholars. We are also aware of the debates surrounding the kinds of legitimacies claimed by indigenous scholars when writing about their own societies – cognisant of the fact that sometimes, vital issues may be ignored. Admitting one’s limitations, we suppose, should be the distinguishing characteristic of every genuine intellectual.

We stated earlier that this volume aims to inspire a new kind of scholarship of the Grasslands – namely, the deep analyses of the cultural dynamics of contemporary Grassland society. For decades, the trend has been to document cultural practices as if they were timeless, bounded and unchanging. The desperate attempt to do what we call “salvage anthropology” – namely to document so-called traditional practices before they disappear under the growing influence of globalisation is nothing new. This trend is not only sterile but has also been rendered redundant by the false assumption that such customary practices have remained “untainted” by modernisation. It is a fact that the Grasslands of Cameroon has been at the centre of various colonial influences since the late 19th century and many customary or local practices and institutions have inevitably been influenced or altered by the intermingling of these forces. What we need is a new breed of scholars and scholarship interested in a deep analysis of the changing

cultural dynamics of the grasslands – for instance, the ways in which traditional religion have remained relevant in the face of world religions, how notions of marriage, adulthood, personhood, traditional politics etc. have changed over time. It is this framework that informs most contributions in this volume.

When we sent out a call for submission to this edited book, we stated very clearly that our objective was to put together articles that explored in broad perspective, the transformation of the cultural landscape of Bali Nyonga, informed by the increasing tide of globalizing influences. We expressed our intention to analyse ‘tradition’ as a set of inherited traits and customs, expressions, beliefs, and behaviours that individuals and societies ascribe to. These traditions serve to chart a course for the future – and they are often defended by some while others are open to innovation and adaptive strategies. Our perspective emphasises continuity and adaptation. This could be at odds with popular usage, which tends to see ‘tradition’s as something frozen in time. We are delighted to note that contributions to this volume are theoretically-informed and foreground in varying ways, how traditions, cultural and social patterns have shaped and in turn been shaped by postcolonial forces and globalization.

The contributors to this volume come from diverse academic backgrounds and as will be evident in the various chapters, their disciplinary perspectives have largely shaped their approaches to the topics under study. Hence, this book draws on anthropological, theological, literary and media studies perspectives. Readers will inevitably find that not all the chapters follow the same format or that a common conceptual framework is embraced by every contributor. Nevertheless, we believe that the contributions in this volume will open up future possibilities for further analysis of similar issues in other kingdoms and communities in the Cameroon Grasslands. If ever there would be a university programme known as Grassfields or Cameroon studies, then this volume will go a long way towards contributing to its vital material.

As editors, we would particularly like to thank all the contributors and those who initially submitted abstracts for this project. We’ve all traversed a very long road and some felt this project may never be finalised. We are therefore grateful for your encouragement, patience

and good humour. We would also like to thank the editorial assistants at Langaa publishers for their incomparable support and professionalism. It is our hope that this book opens up avenues for further conversation on these and more topics.

Jude Fokwang

Lakehead University, Canada

Kehbuma Langmia

Bowie State University, USA

Chapter One

Introduction: Society and Culture in Early 21st Century Bali

Jude Fokwang

Contemporary Bali Nyonga is a rapidly growing town of over 80,000 inhabitants, sixteen kilometres southwest of Bamenda, the capital of the North West region, Cameroon. Bamenda is the most populated town in English-speaking Cameroon. Bali town doubles as the seat of traditional and local government in the subdivision, the latter, characterised by centrally-appointed public administrators and an elected rural council headed by a mayor. Like many towns in Cameroon and Africa, Bali's population is predominantly youthful, with a growing number of young people under 25. Although the evidence for this is debatable, a conservative estimate for the Bali diaspora stands at about 400,000 – and this includes both the domestic and international diaspora whereby “domestic” refers to Bali citizens residing in Cameroon beyond the borders of Baliland and international – to Bali citizens living abroad.

If Cameroon has been aptly referred to in many circles as Africa in miniature, then Bali Nyonga, since its founding in the mid 19th century is emblematic of this so-called “multicultural” region. This is because although the kingdom was established by a faction of the Chamba that migrated from their original homeland about 700km away around the Alantika mountains, the modern kingdom is made up of a mix of ethnic groups including the Bawock, the Mbororo, and several Meta clans, the latter being the aboriginal inhabitants of this region. Although a variety of languages are spoken in the kingdom, Mungaka emerged in the early 20th century as the dominant language of trade and business besides English, the official national language of the region. Mungaka itself is a product of a cultural encounter with the Bati (located in the present-day Western region), not the original language of the Chamba founders of the kingdom. Mungaka could be described as the medium through which the kingdom of Bali is imagined because as Benedict Anderson reminds us, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to face

contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (Anderson 1991:15).

In many ways, one could describe contemporary Bali as emblematic of the paradoxes of postcolonial Africa – namely that it has forcefully merged together previously disparate sovereign city-states into a modern colonially-derived state. It is precisely on account of this that the powerful kings of the Western Grasslands known in varying appellations as *fon*, *fo*, or *foyn*, (singular) have continued to play significant roles (however contested) in regional and national politics. Bali, together with four other kingdoms in the region¹ are classified by the Cameroon state as a “first class chiefdom” meaning that they command a comparatively superior rank to smaller chiefdoms in the area. Indeed, as one of the chapters in this volume will reveal, local politics is fiercely contested by both old actors representing “tradition” as well as modern political actors prominent in both the ruling and opposition parties. These processes have had profound effects on local attitudes on traditional leadership in the region.

Bali is also rapidly urbanising and in certain respects could be described as cosmopolitan. In fact, Bali has maintained a long history of marrying together crucial transnational links with local interests, illustrated by their alliance with German traders, explorers and the nascent German colonial state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (cf. Nkwi and Warnier 1982; O'neil 1996). Today, Bali is strategically connected by the trans-African highway which runs from Dakar to Mombasa, although parts of this major highway are still under construction. This notwithstanding, Bali finds itself at the centre of globalising influences and rapid developments in information technologies (internet and mobile telephones) which have connected the town with cosmopolitan centres around the world such as London, Washington DC, New York, Johannesburg etc. Thus in many ways, Bali at the dawn of the 21st century finds itself at the nexus of transnational linkages that have been deepened and broadened on account of the remarkable scale of its diaspora population. By diaspora, we are referring to both the domestic and

¹ Bansa, Kom and Bafut are the three other kingdoms classified as 1st class “fondoms”. This classification has been opposed by prominent politicians and so-called “second-class or third-class” chiefs.

international dispersal of populations that claim Bali descent. Writing 85 years ago, Hunt remarked about a pattern that was as true to his time as it is today. He wrote: “Today the young men seek in foreign adventure and trade the excitement that war formerly provided, and are to be found exploring other countries far from their homes” (Hunt 1925:6). One only needs to see the growing population of Bali immigrants in major urban centres in Cameroon. In the USA alone, over a thousand individuals (adults and children) are involved in the annual conventions of the Bali Cultural Association (BCA) an umbrella organisation that unites the Bali diaspora in North America.² The strong presence of Bali diaspora populations in major parts of Cameroon and the West have been translated into the expressed need to bring “development” to Bali through various home-town associations (cf. Page 2007). This means that individuals and groups have chosen to invest in the development of their home town enabling them to build alliances with locals or to critique the state of social and economic development in the Bali homeland. Thus, at the dawn of the 21st century, Bali as a place and an imagined homeland has witnessed “powerful expressions of collective identity” (Castells 1997) tending to enhance globalization and cosmopolitan ideals. This means that multiplicities of processes are at work – namely, the mobilization of dispersed peoples for the benefit of collective identity, ethnicity, family, locality, language etc. This book makes an attempt to analyse and provide relevant perspectives on these sociocultural processes. But before we move onto some of the theoretical concerns that inform this volume, let us first turn to a short history of the Chamba.

² Although the BCA aims to unite all the Bali diaspora in North America, it is dominated by individuals from Bali Nyonga, which today commands the greatest population among all the Bali Chamba kingdoms in the Cameroon Grasslands.

might suffice to summarise its history in a few words. A detailed account of Chamba history and migration can be found in the works of Nyamndi (1988) and Fardon (1988).

The peoples known as the Chamba migrated from their homeland in the late 18th century due partly to communal tensions with their neighbour, the Batta. Their original home can be located on the borders between Cameroon and Nigeria at the foot of the Alantika Mountains. In fact, today, there is a town to the west of the Alantika Mountain called Chamba. It is probable that the present-day town of Chamba is populated by descendants of the Chamba Daka who were kindred with the Chamba Leko – both groups united by a common ethnicity although linguistically different. Surrounding groups referred to both linguistic groups as the Sama from which the term Chamba is believed to have originated (Nyamndi 1988:3). Unlike the Chamba Daka, most of those who departed this homeland were the Chamba Leko, from whom the Bali of the Grasslands trace their descent.



Figure 2: Town of Chamba in Northern Cameroon on the western slopes of Alantika Mountains

Historians estimate that the Chamba Leko departed their homeland between 1785 and 1790, moving southwards using as their guide, the Benue River. On their way, they established alliances and incorporated several groups, notably amongst who were the Buti, (from the Kontcha area) the Kufad and the Tikali. Further south, they set up camp in Banyo from where they organised themselves into raiding parties and raided the northern Grasslands including the old capital of the Nso Kingdom, Kovifem (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:16). Banyo remains critical to Bali historians because it was here that Galega I was born, c.1815-1820 and it was also during this period that Gawolbe's descendants emerged as leaders of a contingent of the Chamba Leko, which by now had split again into two major camps. Gawolbe II and his followers entered the Grasslands c.1820s through the north-east and by now had already incorporated a number of Bati speaking soldiers into their army. Gawolbe and his soldiers raided right across the Grasslands all the way to the "south-western edge of the escarpment" and in many areas were met with stiff resistance notably by the peoples of Mundani and southern Moghamo (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:17).

It was in the course of these raids that their leader, Gawolbe II was killed c.1830 near Bafu-Fondong in the Dschang district, by which time they had lost most of their horses. Gawolbe's army then retreated and according to certain accounts re-camped in the Santa district where internecine struggles between six sons and a daughter led to a splinter of the group into seven factions namely; Bali Mudi (Muti) led by Ganyama, Bali Gham, Bali Kumbad led by Galabe, Bali Nyonga led by Nahnyonga (who subsequently handed over leadership to Nyongpasi, her son), Bali Gangsin, led by Gavabe, and Bali Gaso, headed by Ganyam (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:17; Bali-Nyonga History and Culture Committee 1986:5).

Historical sources suggest that after the splinter of the Chamba, Nyongpasi led his followers and established a camp on the borders of the Bamum kingdom. Here, they were welcomed by the Bati, a group suffering from persecution of the expanding Bamum kingdom. It should also be highlighted that Nyongpasi's mother had immediate kinship with the Bati and this probably explains the choice of their refuge to this part of the Grasslands. Nyongpasi's attempt to avenge

Bati oppression at the hands of the Bamum met with a vicious defeat by King Mbwoombwo's army, forcing Nyongpasi and his allies to seek refuge in the western Grasslands. It was on their retreat that they incorporated other groups such as the Kundem, Ngiam, Sangam, Won, Ngod, Sed, Lap, Munyam among others. Many of these groups have been immortalised by quarters named after them today in Bali Nyonga. A thorough history of these subgroups and their heritage is yet to be researched and written.



Figure 3: Map showing Current settlement of Bali and key areas on its migratory path in the mid 19th century

Nyongpasi's group first settled near Nkwen and then subsequently moved southwards to Kufom c.1850 (in the vicinity of the old Bali airport) where they set up camp. It was here that Nyongpasi died and was succeeded by his son Galega I who moved the capital to its present site and began the process of transforming Bali from 'a band of raiders and refugees into an effective city-state' (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:18). It is therefore fair to suggest that the Bali kingdom has existed for about 160 years and has been successively ruled by five kings, the present being Doh Ganyonga III. The last 160 or so years have fascinated researchers of Bali Nyonga history and culture. This volume intends to build on and extend the scholarship on Bali which has been growing remarkably for the last 100 years.

Once settled in their present site, Galega I and his team embarked upon the building of a powerful city-state, which entailed the invention or adaptation of new political and social institutions, some of which were borrowed from neighbouring polities. Admittedly, they also refashioned some of their own core institutions which have survived and adapted to modern exigencies. The nascent city-state of Bali Nyonga quickly established its hegemony in the region, albeit with resistance from surrounding groups that had either lost their lands or autonomy, notably several Moghamo-speaking villages. Bali's strategic influence enjoyed a major boost with the arrival of the German explorer, Eugen Zintgraff in 1889, five years after the coastal territories had ceded their autonomy to the Germans. The arrival of the Germans changed everything for the Grasslands, not just the young city-state of Bali Nyonga. Rapidly, Galega I and Zintgraff entered into an alliance intended to maximise and protect each other's interests. For Galega, his alliance with the German explorer would help him expand his economic and political influence in the region (O'neil 1996:84). As for Zintgraff, his vision was to "secure ... the exploitation of human and natural resources along its [Bali's] route" (O'neil 1996:84). Germany successfully expanded its protectorate from the coastal kingdoms to include those of the Grasslands thereby changing in a most dramatic way, the social and political landscape of this region.

Thus in the late 19th century the kingdom of Bali Nyonga played a

decisive role in facilitating German colonial expansion in the western Grasslands in return for German recognition of Fon Galega as paramount ruler in the region among other advantages (O'neil 1996:88). This symbiotic alliance, although short-lived, tilted the regional balance of power in favour of the Bali which found itself at the centre of tremendous politico-military, religious and educational activity, much to the chagrin of its neighbours and rival polities. Although Bali hegemony was gradually undermined by the demise of successive German and British colonial rule, the kingdom still plays a leading role in the political, economic and cultural life of the region. For instance, the Basel Mission first established itself in Bali in 1903 upon the invitation of Galega I, making Bali the first kingdom in the Grasslands to welcome Christian missionaries. It was on account of this that Mungaka was adopted by the Basel Mission as a language of proselytization. Eventually, the Bible was translated into Mungaka, thus placing Bali Nyonga and its language on a prominent platform. Similarly, Bali found itself at the centre of educational advancements when in 1949, the first secondary college in the entire region opened its door to students from the Grasslands and coastal areas. These developments, for good or bad placed Bali in a unique position in the western Grasslands enabling its peoples and leaders to play prominent roles in the cultural, political and economic transformations in the region. These innovations also provoked profound cultural changes – religion, modes of production and exchange, architecture, language, healthcare and of course the very institution of traditional leadership.

This volume aims to examine some of the continuities and changes that have taken place in Bali during the last two or three decades. The various contributions will identify these changes and provide explanations for why things have changed in particular ways.

The Politics of Place and Culture

Past attempts to analyse local traditions and cultures have often done so from approaches that link or associate people with “their” territory whereby the people are often presented as a culturally unitary group (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7). By such logic, the example could be stated that Bali Nyonga “people” live in Bali and to

stretch this even further, this logic assumes that Bali people “have” or “share” something called “Bali culture”. Two issues need to be problematised here. First, assumptions about the bounded and territorialised nature of “culture” need to be countered with a more nuanced understanding of culture as something that is constantly evolving, and adapting to new circumstances. This is the perspective of culture that informs the contributions in this volume. This is clearly at odds with the perspectives of many ordinary folk who tend to talk about “culture” as practices that are *timeless*, *ancient* and *unchanging*. Rather, we need to ask which aspects of “culture” are being emphasised by who and under what circumstances (Wright 1998)? Notions about culture are highly contested and always mediated by power relations, something we hope to highlight in this volume and in future analyses of culture in the Cameroon Grasslands. A review of some of the literature on Bali attests to this critical perspective on culture. For instance, when Nwana et al (1978; 1981) chose to title their edited volume “The Living Culture of Bali-Nyonga”, they were probably conscious of the fact that their analysis was not about Bali culture from the 19th century– but precisely and aptly “the living culture” of the day.

A second problematic that swells from the stubborn association of an essentialised notion of culture and place is the question of whose “culture” are we really describing. To put this into context, if we assume that Bali people live in Bali and that Bali people all share something called Bali culture, what do we make of the fact that Bali since its founding, has been a “multicultural” and indeed multiethnic kingdom? As stated earlier, Bali is composed of many sub-groups some of them made up of Meta clans, the Hausa and Fulani, as well as the Bawock. Recently, conflict erupted between the Fon of Bawock and Bali over the former’s attempt to demarcate Bawock territory as a sovereign chiefdom – separate and different from the kingdom of Bali (see chapter five). Even amongst the so-called “native” Bali, there are cultural practices that pertain to specific subgroups that appear “foreign” to other groups despite the hegemonic claim of a unitary Bali culture. This claim becomes even more tenuous when we take into account the growing Bali diaspora population in both Cameroon and abroad. What precisely is “their”

culture? Is it the same culture practised in Bali? For analysts and many of those who have migrated out of Bali homeland, the idea of culture “as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7). This is particularly true of people occupying the borderlands or who “cross borders more or less permanently” such as immigrants. For these individuals and groups, “the disjuncture of place and culture is especially clear” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7). However, the danger of essentialising culture remains, even for diaspora populations who tend to associate their homeland with a “pure” version of “their” culture irrespective of the material transformations being experienced in the homeland.

What we have sought to put into perspective is that “human groups, however defined, are shifting and uncertain.... People work actively upon what they have received in order to respond to present circumstances, and in so acting, change their cultural inheritance” (Carrithers 1997:101). This means that what we call our culture should always be qualified by a multiplicity of perspectives. It is our hope that the contributions in this volume will address some of the pertinent issues related to Bali identity today, such as what does it mean to be Bali in the contemporary era? What precisely is our “culture” and how is it changing or adapting to new situations? These issues, I believe, ably tackled by the respective contributors will inform future debates on Bali culture on a range of themes including, indigenous religion, ritual, divination, marriage, language and Bali identity in cyberspace as well as questions of local politics and oral discourse.

Organisation of Book

The chapters in this book have been divided into three broad sections; a) rites and rituals, b) Bali online and, c) oral discourse and politics. All the chapters are based on some kind of “field” research and all the contributors are highly qualified in their respective fields of enquiry. We begin by exploring topics that deal with rites and rituals, recognising the salience of rituals in the organisation of social life for as Victor Turner reminds us, “Ritual periodically centralizes what secular activities disperse and confound. Not only does it

centralize but it places in right relation - according to the evaluative yardsticks of the given culture - norms, concepts, relationships and standardized behavioural patterns that have become autonomous, disparate or disorderly” (Turner 1965:160). This section opens with Fochang’s chapter which examines the ways in which traditional religion in Bali has transformed and been transformed by Christian influences. The question of what happens to traditional African religion in the face of Christianity and Islam has preoccupied many scholars for decades but few or no published studies have explored this issue in contemporary Bali. Fochang’s chapter fills this gap, arguing that traditional African religious beliefs and practices have found a new home in Christianity albeit in small measures. Quite remarkably, many of those who hold or are expected to perform priestly functions on behalf of their families such as compound (lineage) heads do not see their practices as intrinsically contradictory to Christian principles. Similarly, ritual practices associated with traditional religious beliefs have been Christianised. Citing the example of a ritual linked to funeral practices, Fochang states that one of these rituals, *tse’ni vu*, has taken on a new meaning in certain Christian denominations. “Instead of going to the farm,” he writes, “an early morning service is conducted in Church to mark the end of the mourning week.” In fact, many families today mark this ritual by dramatising a trip to the farm around the compound, culminating with gun shots, symbolising the act of “chasing away” death and its pollutants. According to Fochang, contrary to concerns that Christianity will completely erode traditional African religion, Christians in Bali have opted to give new meaning to some of their indigenous beliefs. Many individuals now reinterpret their ancestral beliefs through the prism of Christian theology, providing a worthy balance between the supposedly incompatible worldviews.

Mutia and Mecaly pick up the theme of divination in chapter three arguing that “the language used in Bali-Nyonga divination sessions and the divination rituals themselves constitute an integral aspect of the people’s socio-cultural, psychological, and cosmological existence.” Divinations constitute a form of ritual practice which serve many purposes and constituencies as articulately argued by Mutia and Mecaly. Divination, it should be highlighted, “is the

process of using ritual means to reveal things hidden to ordinary perception, such as information about future events, sources of illness, the identity of witches – indeed, anything that cannot be ascertained through profane methods of investigation”(Buckser 1997:123). In most societies the world over, people use divination to establish details about their lives and future prospects. In the Cameroon Grasslands, divinations are sometimes employed in determining the cause of an illness granting that many traditional-medical practitioners subscribe to both supernatural and the germ theory of illness causation. Mutia and Mecaly put this into perspective when they assert that the “Bali-Nyonga believe that human beings are powerless because they are controlled by the ancestral and supernatural worlds. They also believe that human beings are capable of drawing inspiration from the supernatural world to do good and evil.” It is in this context that many individuals, despite the opposition of mainline and evangelical churches, still seek the services of diviners who play key roles in the local health industry. Mutia and Mecaly’s findings echo those of Fochang by showing the ways in which individuals straddle different worlds, in the wake of which they emerge as hybridised entities. This chapter is rich in its analysis of the language structure employed in divination sessions providing context for the interpretation of various divination styles and forms. Mutia and Mecaly therefore make a worthy case for the continued relevance and indeed salience of divination in the lives of locals. Their analyses point to the claim that while diviners continue to draw on time-honoured methods, they have also been innovative by incorporating new ideas and tools (e.g. the mirror, and in a few cases, the bible) in their craft.

In chapter four, Nwana and Nwana provide a lucid description of two rites of passage that remain central to the organisation of social life in Bali; marriage and widowhood. A rite of passage is a particular kind of ritual that transforms individuals from one stage in the life cycle to another; for example, from childhood to adulthood, from being single to being married, from this world to the afterlife etc. As Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner have pointed out, rites of passage are highly structured rituals traditionally divided into three distinct stages; separation, liminality (transition) and aggregation or

re-integration (cf. Turner 1967). Understandably, marriage and widowhood as experienced in Bali could be analysed within the structure of the three stages stated above but this is not within the scope of the objectives spelt about by Nwana and Nwana. Rather, they aim to “document the rites associated to marriage and widowhood as received mainly from oral literature” without delving into the theoretical issues that inform ethnographic descriptions of rites of passage. A remarkable insight enunciated in this chapter and which falls in line with the theoretical framework of this volume is that the rites of passage being described are far from “authentic” Bali practices but have “been influenced by the cultures of the different ethnic groups” that mingled with or hosted the collective people of Bali Nyonga during their migration to their present location.” In fact, this perspective could be stretched even further by acknowledging that Bali cultural institutions have continuously been transformed by their interaction with neighbouring ethnic groups, thereby dispelling any conservative claims to a “pure” and “authentic” culture or way of life. Like many ethnographers before them, Nwana and Nwana are conscious of the fact that the practices they describe are constantly evolving and people give new meanings to old practices in remarkable ways. In their chapter, they document the various influences that have shaped contemporary marriage rites, drawn from the experiences of several of their family members and friends.

The flip side of marriage is widowhood. In fact, widowhood rituals invert the norms that inform and organise marriage rites. Human rights activists and concerned social groups have expressed outrage at the degrading treatment associated with widowhood rituals in Bali. Nwana and Nwana put some of these concerns into perspective by documenting the experiences and stages involved in widowhood rituals. Their findings reveal that insofar as these practices have survived for decades despite growing opposition, certain minute changes have been introduced such as the preference for white dresses by most widows instead of black dresses as in the past. It is also evident from their research that women tend to experience widowhood differently mediated in large measure by their area of residence and perhaps social class (also see Tekwe 2001). Unlike their diaspora-based counterparts, Bali-based women are

expected to comply with the full array of taboos and rules associated with widowhood. Nwana and Nwana point to this ambivalence, thus highlighting the need for reform.

Part two of the book consists of two chapters, both focusing on aspects of online interaction among citizens who identify themselves as ethnic Bali Nyonga. Aptly entitled *Bali Online*, this section brings into sharp focus the salience of the internet in building, reviving and mobilizing individuals and cultural identities in the service of particular causes. Earlier in this chapter, we made the claim that Bali as a place or locale where Bali citizens reside is no longer tenable in a rapidly globalising world. This claim is most significant in the age of the internet where individuals physically located in distant and disparate spaces around the world, commune online in a single virtual place in order to perform and express their ethnic identities. This is the case of the two chapters covered in this section. In chapter five, Ndangam-Fokwang examines the online interaction of Bali citizens on an e-list known as Mbonbani, this in the wake of a communal conflict between the Bawock and their neighbours, the Bali Nyonga. For a brief ethnography on the Bawock, see Chilver (1964).

Ndangam-Fokwang on her part identifies a range of themes and patterns in the online exchanges on the forum, provoked by the skirmish between the Bawock and the Bali. Ideas about the superiority of the Bali to the Bawock are peddled while some subscribers call for tolerance. Other issues identified in the forum include varying perspectives about the contradictory nature of beliefs in traditional religious institutions as well as the role of Christianity in contemporary Bali. These diverse perspectives notwithstanding, Ndangam-Fokwang echoes the insights of anthropologist, Margaret Rodman about the socially constructed nature of place. Rodman contends that places and indeed virtual spaces “have multiple meanings that are constructed spatially. The physical, emotional, and experiential realities places hold for their inhabitants at particular times need to be understood apart from their creation as the locales of ethnography” (Rodman 1992:641). Rodman goes on to assert that “a single physical landscape can be multilocal in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users” (Rodman 1992:647). This view is as true of Bali, the physical

place as well as the virtual community of Bali online (Mbonbani) which, (although could be perceived as a single physical or virtual landscape), is experienced in diverse ways. Ndangam-Fokwang's chapter is significant because it provokes further enquiry on deterritorialized Bali identities in diaspora and virtual spaces, an area that hasn't been researched before. Her research findings echo issues that have preoccupied anthropological explorations in the past such as the growing indeterminacy of cultural and ethnic identities even in so-called remote parts of the world. How Bali citizens online imagine themselves and Bali Nyonga in the process reveal the ways in which imagined communities "come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined home lands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10-11)

In chapter six, Fielding tackles the status and use of Mungaka in a globalising world obsessed with the promotion of dominant cultural patterns. How does Mungaka fit into an online world dominated by English and Cameroon Pidgin English? How literate are native speakers of Mungaka and how does the use of this language fit with ideas of identity, ethnicity and cultural pride? In her attempt to understand social change in Bali, Fielding, turns her lens to a refreshing dynamic, the use of Mungaka in diaspora spaces. She focuses "particularly on the presence of Mungaka in a virtual community to highlight how Mungaka has moved from strictly oral traditional spheres to an online environment, co-existing with larger languages such as English, French and Cameroon Pidgin English." Like Ndangam-Fokwang in chapter five, Fielding takes as her site of study, the internet – focusing specifically on "Mbonbani, a multicultural Diasporic online community". According to her, Mbonbani constitutes "a linguistic space that has been carved out for the people of Bali Nyonga descent" with membership drawn from individuals in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Although one may think of Mbonbani as more than just a linguistic group, she prefers to label it as such because it is one of the few sites where Mungaka is used by those literate in the language to communicate. This notwithstanding, her findings are even more compelling. A

growing number of Bali immigrants who spoke Mungaka in their childhood now find themselves unable to use the language with their own offspring. This finding could also be true of the Bali domestic diaspora in Cameroon. It is on this count that she questions if Mungaka is an endangered language. Despite profound concerns about the role of language in the preservation of cultural practices and beliefs, Fielding concludes that a “closer examination of language use on the Mbonbani forum” reveals that “traditional ways of being are still maintained on the forum even in cases of language shift.” She adds that although “English is predominantly used online, a space has been created as well for the Mungaka language and Bali culture.”

Fielding and Ndangam-Fokwang’s chapters foreground important questions of identity and belonging that remain central to anthropological concerns in the 21st century. The increasing deterritorialization of identity that accompanies processes of migration and displacement requires that we ask questions such as: what does it mean to be Bali in the 21st century? Can one be Bali without having any real or imagined territorial attachment to Bali? What does it mean to speak of a “native land”? The chapters in the section entitled Bali Online, reveal in quite interesting ways, the processes and dynamics rather than the essences involved in the experience of cultural identity among deterritorialized individuals and groups (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The findings in this section illustrate Gupta and Ferguson’s theoretical standpoint that “Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who ... use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world. "Homeland" in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:11). The studies conducted and described for us on Mbonbani egrouop clearly convey the salience of “homeland” for displaced and dispersed Bali immigrants, many of whom maintain an ambiguous relation with the physical “homeland” in Bali Nyonga.

Part three of the book combines two apparently dissimilar topics but which upon closer inspection have areas of common theoretical

concerns. In chapter seven, Langmia examines the nature of social criticism through oral discourse, focusing on Bali's most renowned satirist, Pa Mundam. Langmia uses as his "site" of study, 20 of the cassettes published by Mundam in the 1980s and 1990s in which he made use of satire, sarcasm and innuendos to comment on social life in Bali. According to Langmia, Mundam's "tapes" or assemblage of satire are as relevant to contemporary life in Bali as they were more than two decades ago when they were first circulated. Langmia posits that "traditional forms of communication in Africa have dual functions: to entertain and to teach" and this, precisely, is the context in which Mundam's satire can be placed. In chapter seven, Langmia does a thorough job of outlining and analysing the various themes identified in Mundam's satire. He argues that Mundam's "tapes" have contributed in a special way to the instruction of Mungaka to young listeners, thanks to his use of proverbs, idioms and graphic description of certain ritual practices. Circulated at a time when formal instruction in Mungaka had completely been replaced by English, Mundam's tapes served as a medium of instruction for the young without losing its satirical force.

In chapter eight, Fokwang draws on his research on chieftaincy and democratisation in Africa (cf. Fokwang 2009) to reflect on the changing role and position of traditional leadership in Bali Nyonga, with particular focus on the incumbent, Fon Ganyonga III. Central to his analysis are the various positionings assumed by the Fon and the claims he and his supporters have made for political legitimacy in the era of democratisation. Fokwang argues that Ganyonga's predicament is indicative of the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize the lives, not only of most traditional leaders in the North West Region of Cameroon, but also of ordinary citizens in general. Fokwang argues that while there have been little or no demands for the eradication of chieftaincy, many have called for its reform; that is, a reform that will serve the interests of the masses rather than those of the traditional elite. He contends that the fon's positioning on diverse issues within Bali and beyond have led to the erosion of his legitimacy, particularly in matters political. On the other hand, he has successfully made and won some credibility

through a range of decisive reforms in customary issues particularly with respect to abusive widowhood practices.

Both Langmia and Fokwang's chapters foreground the central issue of social criticism seen through the prism of relatively "powerless" actors. On the one hand, Bali residents are resentful of their king's so-called "meddling" in party politics in a context of failed democratic transition. For many residents as well as Bali citizens in the diaspora, the king is expected to be "above" partisan politics, a position Ganyonga has been reluctant to adopt. Hence he is seen as having sided with the repressive national government against his people. On the other hand, Mundam criticises Bali residents, particularly the retired citizens for having lived wasted lives, for their greed, for their lack of foresight in the conduct of their private and communal lives. Both chapters point to the cracks in local society and the ways in which individuals and groups have made attempts to name and fix these challenges.

Conclusion

This volume is the first of its kind in many decades. It celebrates amongst its contributors both women and men of Bali descent. As both "insiders and outsiders", the contributors to this volume have taken a close examination at various aspects of contemporary Bali; traditional religion, divination systems, marriage, as well as issues of cultural identity among the Bali diaspora, providing unique insights that show the continued importance of "homeland" for many Bali citizens both at home in Cameroon and abroad.

This book stands out in two special ways. First, it is not a handbook about "Bali culture", but precisely about the changing nature of "culture" in Bali. In other words, it is an exploration of how cultural changes are being experienced by individuals and communities across time and space. The authors are critically aware that any static understanding of culture is untenable in the present era of globalisation. Thus, contributors are inspired by the tide of social and cultural changes blowing across the Grasslands of Cameroon and are determined to understand for instance, how traditional religion has survived and is surviving through new religious patterns and

beliefs, or Mungaka's role in defining ethnic identity and belonging in a diasporic environment.

Second, this volume is special because for the first time, three female Bali authors have contributed to a book on cultural life in Bali. Previous publications on Bali culture/history have hardly received any kind of insight or contribution from female Bali authors. This book therefore prides itself as a pioneer in the future of scholarship on Bali which draws together both female and male scholars to reflect on the critical issues that confront their real or imagined "homeland", Bali. It is intended that this will inspire more female authors to explore and write about issues relevant not only to women's cultural lives but on those issues that have significance of a general nature in contemporary Bali.

Last, this book aims to encourage debate on core issues of interest to Bali citizens worldwide. Today, more than ever before, globalisation is intensifying and virtual communities of Bali citizens are growing as well. These virtual communities have served as strategic sites for debates on such issues as language, inter-ethnic relations in the Cameroon grasslands, ritual, and many other customary practices. We hope that this book engages with and serves as a useful tool in furthering the aims of these intellectual exchanges both in Bali and in its diasporas.

Chapter Two

Old Wine in New Wineskin? Social Change and Traditional Religion in Bali Nyonga

Babila Fochang

Introduction

Since the 1950s a wind of change has been blowing across Africa. There is an upsurge in the revival of cultural values, customs and traditions that were once frowned upon by colonial administrators and missionaries (Gibellini 1994:5-6). This seems to highlight or point to the rejection of colonial and missionary attempts to obfuscate Africa's rich cultural and religious heritage. The version of Christianity that was introduced to Africans was strongly influenced by the spirit of the enlightenment. The enlightenment was tended to privilege reason at the expense of faith and stressed that there was a thick dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical realms. What could not be established scientifically or pragmatically was rejected or considered illusory.

On the other hand the African worldview is one that is all embracing. There is a very thin line that separates the spiritual from the physical. African ontology is anthropocentric. This ontology as John Mbiti (1969:16) has rightly demonstrated has five categories. The existence of one presupposes the existence of the others. Any disruption at any level seriously affects the others. God stands at the top as the creator and sustainer of his creation. God³ is followed by the spirits which include supernatural spirits that were born as such and the spirits of dead human beings who have been elevated to that level by virtue of their virtuousness in life. The third on the rung are humans; they are followed by animals and plants and lastly, inanimate

³ We avoid using any gender nouns or pronouns when talking about deities in Africa. Such vocabularies do not exist in many African languages. Take for example Jesus Christ, God's only begotten son is translated into Mungaka as *Mu N'ikob* – God's child.

objects. These all exist to serve humanity. In this work we shall use this ontology as our interpretive key to understand Bali religion and in the next section we shall look at the interface between Christianity, Islam and Bali religion. In the last section we shall reflect on the future of Bali religion.

Our approach to the study of Bali traditional religion is impartial and without any biases for any particular religion. I avoid the word objectivity since it is too misleading in that nobody approaches any investigation like a *tabula rasa*. Theology is the study of religion from the inside. It assumes that the faith is true, and then it seeks to explore it more fully and often attempts to relate it to faith. Whereas to the researcher of other religions there is the need for a scholarly approach that is neutral, detached and non-committed. It looks at the form of the religion and does not question its validity (cf. Turner 1977), bearing in mind that to the practitioners of any religion, everything done within it is true.

Today, most Bali people are Christians and a minority are Muslims. These two main religions harbour fanatics who may not consider traditional religion to be of any worth since their religious disposition or orientation exhorts them to demonize all traditional deities. This is particularly evident among the new Charismatic churches and is vividly portrayed by the unquestionable and insatiable consumption of Nigerian movies that dramatise the demonic and destructive forces of traditional gods and their eventual or inevitable destruction by the Christian God. It may be difficult for a Christian fanatic to assert that there is salvation outside Christianity. However, it is good to know that God is bigger than we may want to define him.

When the colonialists, explorers and missionaries arrived in Africa they did not consider that 'savages could have any notion of deity' (Idowu 1973). As such, they did not want to accept the fact that Africans had a sophisticated understanding of deity perhaps even better than European missionaries. The religions of Africa were considered as juju, animism, totemic worship, fetishism, nature worship or at best ancestor worship. This was the experience in Bali when Zintgraff the first European to Bali felt that "definite ideas of God and an organized cult are absent. There is a belief in spirits

which expresses itself in various situations, and angry ghosts. And their appeasement are in the centre of things” (Chilver 1966).

Zintgraff’s conclusion was that a good God was not worshipped. Although *Ñikob* [God] denotes a superior being, he is a fearful bush demon that is propitiated when the unfortunate occurs. Besides, Zintgraff capitalizes on the *Fon’s* philosophical pragmatism concerning the matter of religion when he said,

Man only knows what he sees, knowledge is the only right basis of belief and everything else is useless speculation; but if the missionaries came to my land I would, if I could see the advantages of it, be willingly be baptized, but would not exclude other beliefs since those of men are only good if they do not rely on one particular belief; but I wish to be a friend of the whites and take the Good from wherever it is to be found (Moisel 1908:271).

A Definition of Religion

Among the complex definitions of religion we agree with this narrower definition of religion as “belief in God or gods, together with the practical results of such belief as expressed in worship, ritual, a particular view of the world and of the nature and destiny of man, and the way someone ought to live his daily life” (Howkins 1988:575). With this definition no people can be considered as being without religion; contrary to Hunt’s (Hunt 1925:29) assessment that “a definite conception of god and a form of worship is unknown” to the Bali people.

Traditional Religion in Bali Nyonga

Bali Nyonga is a collective group formed from ethnic communities of diverse backgrounds who at the period of the missionary encounter were one people striving towards a common identity (see introduction to this volume). A study of their religion must take into consideration this complex process. However three broad groups can be identified. The Yani the original Chamba who migrated from the Benue/Adamawa region and the Buti and Kufad that joined them while in the north of Cameroon, the groups that for one reason or the other joined the Chamba from the present day western province and the Tanka, that is the Moghamo clans that are

part of present day Bali like the Mudum, Kunyang, Mbelu and Mbufung. National unity seems to have obliterated these divisions but in the practice of religions they are still visible because there are some variations in practice. For instance the sacred day of Mbufung has been nationalized to be the market day for all Bali, but to the people of Mbufung it is a sacred day. The strong point of this unity is royalty which is the symbol of unity.

Four component entities have been conventionally identified for understanding the transcendent in African religions: God, divinities (ruling powers, either of a locality or of a dimension of life), ancestors and objects of power (Walls 2001). All may not be given priority, but that does not mean their absence. There is a strong understanding of the existence of *Nikob* (Supreme Being). There are household divinities, clan divinities, and tribal divinities. As we mentioned earlier royalty is the point of unity, as such the clan deities of the Yani has become national deities. Lela therefore that was a fertility sacrifice to a clan deity has become a national affair for all the Bali Nyonga. The same goes for Voma the Yani deity of protection and good harvest. Ancestors are a strong component and are worshipped by almost every family compound or clan. Power has to do with mystical forces. In the African spiritual realm, there exists the worlds of power (it is neutral) where some people have the ability to explore for positive or negative ends. Evil people tap this power and use it against their enemies or do it on behalf of others. In Bali this category includes *ghan sa* and *ba lum* (mysterious people and witches and wizards). On the other hand the good medicine men tap this power to counter the evil machinations of the malicious people.

The Locus of traditional religion in Contemporary Bali

Birth, Marriage and Death

Mbiti (1969:1) has remarked that Africans are “notoriously” religious. This is true of the Bali people. Whether stationary or on the move they are always involved in religious activities. Religion permeates all of human existence. Thus birth, marriage and death are all religiously interpreted. We shall therefore limit ourselves in understanding religious practices within these areas of life which I consider to be the focus of traditional life. Life includes the concept

of death as well. Three things characterize the Bali philosophy of life: birth, marriage, death and the hereafter. These three are inseparable because when one talks of death, the issue at stake is life. Conversely when one contemplates about the fullness of life, it is a reflection of how the end shall look like.

Marriage and procreation are what connect the two together. Great emphasis is laid in the continuity of the family line. That is why if one is regarded to be past the age of marriage and without children, such a person is mocked with expressions like: *u la' ku bo nun wo ni bo u* [when you die a stone shall be placed in your palm]. The stone is put in your palm so that you should not look back and expect any filial obligation from the living. Since you did not leave behind any progeny, do not expect the full rites that the departed deserve. Besides, it is said that *mun beh nkwini len* [a child is the firewood of old age], it is also said that *ma mbi ni mbi len nyon bun mun* [when mother goat is getting old, it tends to suck the breast of its young] (That is why polygamy is essential because *kob ngui ma ni mbun nden bang beh* [a big bamboo forest cannot lack dry bamboo]). A father laments over a wayward child that: *mu la' ku nda a ve* [my family line shall become extinct after my death]. In the case of the death of all of one's children, one laments: *mu la' ku mvi kwed* [I shall be eaten by dogs when I die].

The dead must have a decent burial and must be properly mourned for, because they are believed to have the powers to bring misfortune upon the family. After the burial of a dead parent, all grown up children are expected to bring dance groups to manifest at the *koen vu* [death celebration]. To this end most libation prayers include the request for prosperity and posterity: *Ñikob fa fu' mfa ndzui* [*Ñikob* give us wealth, give us the consumers of the wealth].

Although it is considered abnormal to die without a child, it is equally acknowledged that a child is God's gift. If *Ñikob* does not give you, you cannot manufacture one. This is better expressed in the proverb: 'if I do not have a child in my womb, I will not give birth to my intestines' In the same way human effort alone does not give sound moral training to a child because *munimbom* [a man is according to how he has been moulded], so the person with good children may not necessarily boast because 'if you tune a song and

people answer well you may be acclaimed as a good singer'. This does not necessarily mean that you know how to sing well or better than others. (It is according to the wish of *Nikob*)

The importance of having children is displayed in names like Wadinga and Dinga both meaning "my spears are now many." The spear symbolizes a warrior; to have a son is to have another spear, the more your sons the more spears you possess. There is also Bangmia - I have now put a nail to my compound, meaning that the person feels quite assured that even if he dies the family line must continue, because *ta' tui nyin ma ma' kob beh* [one tree does not make a forest]. Marriage and procreation are therefore religious activities that enhance the perpetuation of ancestral veneration.

The Lela Festival and Voma

The Lela festival is the high point where social interaction takes place and which as we have stated is a religious festival meant to serve the needs of all Bali People. During this festival the gods of the land are invoked to ensure peace, fertility and protection. Voma has the responsibility of enthroning a new *Fon* because it is the custodian of what constitutes mystical power in Bali. As a deity Voma is a vengeful god that destroys wrong doers, but it is also responsible for fruitful harvest of millets that was originally the staple food crop of the Bali people. These two deities are inextricably linked to royalty and as such forges the unity of the people be they Christians, Muslims or members of other faiths.

The future of Traditional Religion amidst Missionary⁴ Religions

Stöckle, (1996:14) observed insightfully that the mind of the Bali "is not narrow nor irrefutably linked to old conceptions, but is wide open for new and creative ideas without giving up old principles which have somehow proved feasible and helpful." As we have noted earlier it is difficult to determine the degree of traditional religious

⁴By missionary we refer primarily to Christianity and Islam as opposed to African Religions that are generally clan-based or for a family. As such people do not join the religion. They belong because one is born into the religion so there is no room for atheism.

practices that seek survival by cloaking themselves in Islam. This is because Islam is a non-translatable faith unlike Christianity that survives through translation and inculturation. Perhaps this explains why the Bali people have not been enthusiastic about Islam despite the fact that their contact with Islam dates further back than their encounter with Christianity (see Nyamndi 1988)⁵ It is not only the new religions that will influence the future of traditional religion. Civilisation has a deep impact on traditional religion. When worldview perception is shifted to embrace new values, things can no longer be the same. In the past one could say that in a general sense there was no atheist in Africa. The story is not the same again with the advent of western education. Traditional religion in a sense ensures community welfare. Unfortunately today such communal solidarity has been displaced with the spirit of individualism, coupled with rural exodus in search of greener pastures. In the midst of all these disruptive factors, traditional religions seek to survive in various forms. These include recession, absorption, restatement, reduction, invention, adjustment, revitalization and appropriation (Walls 2001:131). Since traditional religion in Bali does not have a unified form one may find the various forms of responses. Through these forms of responses we can draw our conclusions as to the future of traditional religion in Bali Nyonga.

When recession is the response there is a mass exodus towards the new elements. The presence of the many church houses in Bali and the influx of denominations may lead us to say there is recession. Recession often includes absorption – and this is common in Catholic and Protestant Christianity where elements of the traditional religion are absorbed into Christianity. In this case there is the experience of a spiritual overlap between the old and new religions. This is evident in the practice of Christian funerals and death celebrations where the traditional practices of *sang vu* and *tad vu*⁶ are

⁵ One of the reasons suggested for their migration from Koncha was their objection of Islamic invasion. Besides one of the reasons why the missionaries opened the Bali Station in 1903 was to check the advance of Islam. Galega I was not interested in Islam when they came to Bali.

⁶ On the fourth day after burial, the compounds that are related to the deceased by blood or affinity come together and eat a communal meal which signifies ‘feeding death’ so that death may be full and no longer visit the family again.

shifted to the day of celebration. They always begin with an open-air meditation and homily in the compound of the deceased. After this the celebration follows the pattern of traditional practice. The Christians now eat the meat of *tad vu* on the day of celebration. Roasted plantain, fried groundnuts and boiled dried maize that used to be eaten by family members on *ntsu' ma' san vu*⁷ [food to ward off death] are now brought to the Christians on the day of celebration. Thus in a Christian family, when the announcer declares the day of death celebration, he adds 'since this is a Christian observance of death, we shall do everything on the day of celebration. This means that the *'san vu* and *tad vu* shall be done all at once.' Until recently Christian death observances in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon for example, excluded traditional dances. Eventually the Njenka parish combined Christian dances with traditional dances and this was a major issue which was finally resolved by the Sessions of all the Parishes at a Zonal Session meeting.⁸ The day of *tse'ni vu* has been Christianised; instead of going to the farm, an early morning service is conducted in Church to mark the end of the mourning week. Perhaps the most significant traditional religious practice concerning death that has been filled with new content by Christians is the *tsed tu vu*. In the 1980s the Bali traditional Council decreed that the *tsed tu vu* should be abolished because it was not economical. Recently in its session of June 24 2003, the Traditional Council resolved, "All death celebrations shall continue to last for one day from 6a.m. - 6 p.m." The point we are making here is that it is not Christianity succeeding, but rather that traditional religion is surviving inside Christianity in what Mbuy (2007) calls 'anonymous Christianity.'

However *tu vu*⁹ has been indirectly brought into the Church by way of the Memorial Service. The Memorial Service begins with a

⁷ *Ma' san vu* takes place on the fourth day after death. The women bring maize and groundnuts and the father of the compound provides plantain. The plantains are roasted, the groundnuts fried and the maize boiled. All those who come to the deceased compound on this day participate in the meal. Death is scattered so that it can be confused and not see its way into the compound again.

⁸ I could not have information concerning the date when this meeting took place.

⁹ Literally it means 'cutting off death's head.' This is a second death celebration that is done one year after death. Cutting off death's head probably symbolizes the destruction of death.

normal Church Service on Sundays where the family comes with wreaths. After Service the congregation moves to the compound where they pray at the graveside and lay the wreath. In contradiction to what the Traditional Council saw as economic waste, the lavish expenditure of the Memorial Services far exceeds that of the *tsed tu vu*. The religious understanding of death here remains traditional but has merely been taken into Christianity and transformed.

Restatement is the process where the traditional religion is in tension with the new religion but reflects on some of its concepts and by this modifies its previous views on that concept. *Nikob* for instance is understood now to be closer in Bali worldview than he was in pre-missionary times. Besides, the priests of *Lela* begin their traditional ritual opening of the festival with Christian prayer. *Lela* itself, an otherwise highly religious sacrifice that seeks the goodwill of the ancestors for fertility, protection and peace is now commonly understood by many as a purely social activity. Reduction takes place when the traditional religion is reduced or confined in its scope. *Voma* for instance limits the area where it goes to *kned nguen* (inaugurate millet harvest). Certain rites like the coronation of a *mfonte* (sub chief) which used to last for seven days has been reduced to one day because the *ndzui ndab* (successor) has to go to work etc. Invention involves creativity in traditional religions caused by modernity and new religions. For example the late Ba Ndiamngu at Boh Titamungu was reputed as a diviner, but he was actually using only the *Napoleon's Book of Fate*. There is a recent attempt by the Faith and Hope Ministry of Mr. Babila Tita Eric that seeks to include traditional rites like libation into Christianity.¹⁰

Adjustment is not discernible in Bali but the late Ba TitaFokum for example called his Bible *Bu Ngam* (divination bundle). He used to divine through the Ngamsi (earth spider) but when he was given a Bible this replaced the Ngamsi and each time he wanted to listen to a

¹⁰ Mr. Babila Tita Eric a former 'Private Secretary to Sinyam Siwe (former Director of the Douala Ports Authority) started The Faith and Hope Ministry in Bali sometime in 2005. In a poster that he posted for a crusade he had his picture holding a Bible and at the same time pouring libation with a buffalo horn cup. The Ministry has suffered retardation because together with Sinyam Siwe they were jailed in 2009 for siphoning the funds of the Douala Ports Authority.

Bible story he would call one of his sons not to read for him, but to divine for him (Fochang 2004:94). Some traditional diviners use some modern articles as objects divination; some even claim that they use the Bible and a key to detect a thief.

Revitalization takes place mostly under the spirit of cultural retrieval heritage. As we know most cultural practices are religiously motivated. Cultural retrieval therefore is an act of revitalizing traditional religion. The Lela festival for instance attracts more Bali people every year. To the majority it is merely a forum to socialize and to meet with family members and old friends, yet underlying this festivity is the sacrifice to *Nikob* through the ancestors of the land soliciting for fecundity, prosperity and health. Lastly appropriation takes place whereby people are made to feel proud of their culture which includes religion.

If one were to make a general assessment of the future of traditional religion in Bali judging from observable cultural and religious practices that are going on in Bali, it will be correct to state that traditional religion will be around for a very long, long time through any of the responses listed above.¹¹ For instance it was reported that a mass conversion took place in 1947 following an eclipse of the sun (Fochang 2001:40). That day was *ntanmbutu* - one of the market weekdays.¹² A proverb has been coined because of the

¹¹ Pastor Amah Christopher of the Apostolic church Bali believes the contrary. He says that having been a student of CPC Bali from 1981 – 1986, he now can say that the response to Christianity is improving for the following reasons: 1. Most native doctors confess that they are losing a lot of clients because there is a movement towards Christianity. 2. The palace is a place of worship from time to time. 3. Some families are now destroying their shrines. 4. Lastly, recently, physical force was used to fight for Voma like in the case of Bawock. According to him the use of physical force is an indication that Voma has become impotent and cannot fight for itself. Rev. Ngong Chia of the Full Gospel thinks in the same line. He thinks that traditional religious authority is dying out because Voma is losing its authority. The practice of widowhood is dying out. However I find a contradiction because even though he thinks traditional religion is dying out he estimates the membership of his denomination to be about 90 persons despite the fact that they have been existing since 1977. The same could be said of the Apostolic Church that also came to Bali in the seventies. Interviewed by author 24/07/2007. One can also note that the Gospel has been in Bali for more than one hundred years but traditional religious practices remain intact.

¹² The people of the Grassfields have an eight-day week.

eclipse. Christians and non-Christians alike use this proverb. When an unexpected misfortune strikes somebody, the one will say *ndzēm ntanmbutu sen mui na* - the darkness of *ntanmbutu* has befallen me - meaning that the matter took the person unawares. The mass conversion was linked with the fear of the judgment of the last days. The eclipse was seen as a sign of the last days, and was to usher damnation and perpetual punishment in hell for the unrepentant. This was the teaching that the missionaries emphasised.

Today many titleholders are Christians. Some were Christians before becoming successors to deceased family members while others were successors before becoming Christians. A successor has to assume a priestly function and pour libation and sometimes sacrifice to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine. Christian influence has permeated all aspects of life in Bali to an extent that even traditional religious practitioners agree that what they do is nothing other than the tradition of the land. During the *Lela* festival¹³ of 2003, Ba Gwe who carried the sacrificial sheep is a Christian of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. He became a successor in 2001. According to him there is nothing that is done at the *Lela* sacrifice that compromises his Christian faith. He has been asked to carry on with the tradition of the fathers. That does not affect his conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Saviour of mankind of which he is part.¹⁴

For Ba Trukang, who is a priest at the *Wolela* (sacred stones at the palace plaza) Christ is above the ancestors. God created the ancestors and showed them their particular way of reaching him. So before they anointed the *Wolela* on the night preceding *su'ju* on 18 December 2003, he said a Christian prayer before the proceedings commenced. He prayed to *Nyikob* through Jesus Christ and asked that *Nyikob* should guide and direct the activities of *Lela* especially as it involved a lot of gun firing. He does not think it is just a mere incorporation of Christ into the pre-Christian religion; it is an implantation of the

¹³ The festival however remains popular to the people because it provides opportunity for fanfare, jubilation and amusement. It is also the time when those who are out of the village return with presents for family members who are at home.

¹⁴ Interview 19th December 2003.

Lordship of Christ over and above the ancestors of the land to whom sacrifices are offered during the *Lela* festival.¹⁵

The other avenue by which Christian concepts find their way with ease into traditional religious practice is the reference constantly made to the Old Testament sacrifices which are comparable to the Bali sacrifices. Another common feature is that non-Church goers often begin their conversations by *Nwa'ni Nyikob sun nga...* [The Bible says...]. Others, drawing from Roman Catholic experience insist that their ancestors are their saints. Thus Ba Tita Fokum, a noble and successor pours libation because it is hereditary, but he strongly believes in the Lordship of Christ. He thinks that there are about ten percent of successors who ignore Christianity because of ignorance or illiteracy. In his words, "the ancestors cannot replace Jesus Christ."¹⁶

In the *mandzong* houses, [social groups, usually constituting a dance troupe] the proceedings often begin with prayer. It has become traditional for all the denominations to go to the palace once yearly to greet the *Fon*. During such visits they go with firewood and foodstuffs. They meditate and pray with the *Fon* who in turn gives salt to the women and drinks to the men. Stöckle (1996) describes the integration of Christianity into traditional institutions with great precision: "This God is a God of love who has spoken to mankind through Jesus Christ has become the new and liberating Good News to everybody...." (14).

Some *mandzong* groups composed songs, which were eventually taken over by Christians. This shows that the songs were composed with Christian concepts in mind. The *Nda Mbui* for example sings

Nandzam ntsu'mvi ba wo mun ma dzi beh, a ku ndzi Nyikob

Nobody knows the last day, only *Nyikob* knows.

There is also

Nwa'ni u to mu o o dzid la ni boni.

Your letter has come, have a safe journey.

Divination as we have noted is closely associated with religious practices since most sacrifices take place at the request of the diviner.

¹⁵ Interview on the 19th December 2003. Ba Trukang is a Christian of the Catholic Church.

¹⁶ Interview 15th, March 2004.

It is difficult to determine the belief of the individual, but it is of help if one knows where the individual turns to for help or succour in the face of adversity. The strong presence and influence of traditional religion can be seen when the present Fon of Bali transformed the eight-day week into a seven day week to match with the modern week days. It did not last long. All the ills and deaths in Bali during that period were attributed to the change. This demonstrates that memory is integral to human existence. Whoever forgets the past suffers from amnesia (Walls 2001:13).

Conclusion

Our objective in this chapter has been to find out if traditional religion still exists in Bali Nyonga and whether it is still a force to reckon with. What we can confidently conclude is that “traditional religion has not died out, nor has it been reduced to an atavistic ‘pre-modern’ practice (Walls 2001:119). It has turned out that Christianity to a larger extent and Islam to a lesser extent are just new wine skins that the old wine of traditional religion has been poured into for accommodative purposes. Traditional religion has continued to survive in the guise of especially Christianity. The four components for understanding the transcendent are still very much around and will be there for a very long time. And as Mbiti (1969:271) has said

The final test for the continuing existence of these religions (*traditional religion, Christianity and Islam*) in our continent is not which one shall win in the end. The test is whether mankind benefits or loses from having allowed religion to occupy such a privileged and dominating position in human history, in man’s search for his origin and nature of being, in the experience of responding to his environment, and in the creation of his expectations and hope for the future (*italics mine*).

Chapter Three

Performance Aesthetics, Structure and Language of Bali Nyonga Divination Systems

Babila Mutia & Bejemiah Mecaly

Introduction

This research set out to study the performance aesthetics, structure, and language of Bali Nyonga divination systems. The primary objective of the research has been to demonstrate that the language used in Bali Nyonga divination sessions and the divination rituals themselves constitute an integral aspect of the people's socio-cultural, psychological, and cosmological existence. The scope of the research was limited to divination performances conducted exclusively in *Mungaka* (the Bali Nyonga language). Hence, the study excluded non-*Mungaka* language diviners. The study's primary focus was on private (as opposed to public) divination like the Lela¹⁷ and Voma cult divination which "takes place either in the open space in the middle of a town or village" (see Shaw 1991) or in a ritual setting, like the Lela communal ritual/divination which takes place at a stream at the outskirts of the village.

Beliefs and Cosmology

The Bali Nyonga cosmology (like other African cosmologies) comprises three distinct spheres - the spiritual world, the world of the ancestors, and the world of the living. The spiritual sphere is made up

¹ The Lela and Voma divination in Bali Nyonga are controlled by secret societies that keep the craft and practice of their divination secret. As Shaw (1991) indicates, "The distinction between public and private divination forms part of a set of contrasts between openness to and secrecy from social scrutiny whose meanings are variable and multivalent ... what is hidden from the community is highly valued, since the most powerful and effective knowledge is secret (for instance, that controlled by the secret societies, by chief and by ritual and occupational specialist)

of *Ñikob* (the supreme deity) and *BaÑikob* (the lesser spirits or deities). *Ñikob* inhabits a place called *Ninden*, which is somewhere in the sky. It is in *Ninden* that He is believed to watch and rule over all creation. As controller of the universe, *Ñikob* is the all-knowing and all-powerful divine being to whom everybody looks up to in moments of adverse fortunes. Although *Ñikob* has these attributes, He is not worshipped because He does not have a shrine or any other place of worship. Next to *Ñikob* are *BaÑikob*, the minor deities or spirits. Some of these spirits are associated with thunder, lightning, night, mountains, forests, rivers, and waterfalls. The Bali Nyonga interpretation of the universe, based on their ancestral beliefs and practices, is not far removed from Busia's (1991:191) revelation of the Ashanti cosmology:

To the Ashanti the universe is full of spirits. There is the Great Spirit, the Supreme Being, who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits which animate trees, animals, or charms; and there are the ever-present spirits of the ancestors (*nsamanfo*) whose contact with the life of man on the earth brings the world of the spirits so close to the land of the living.

The Bali Nyonga spiritual cosmos, like the Ashanti universe, is proliferated by the spirits of people who are recently dead but come back wandering about in search of a home. Although these spirits do not have concrete shapes or features, they usually take on human forms when they appear to the living.

Bali Nyonga ancestors, known as *Kusi*, are, to borrow Mbiti's words, "the living dead" (Mbiti 1969) who are never left out in any activity at the family or community. The living dead—who are venerated, departed members of the family or community like Fons, family heads, and elderly family members are considered as ancestors. It is in this regard that Kayode (1984) explains that:

The ancestral spirits are of course spirits of the dead. Their habit is essentially local and they hover around where the living ancestors dwell: houses, compounds, and family places. They are considered the general link between human beings and the supernatural world.... they expect a share of the respected affection due to older members

of the family and to some extent, partake in the material prosperity of the family. (19)

Ancestors are contacted through dreams, visions, and divination sessions. This is why, more often than not, whenever a misfortune befalls someone, he/she contacts a diviner at once. Ancestors, thus, retain a strong hold over the living in Bali Nyonga. Mbiti is of the view that:

...the *living-dead* (i.e., the departed of up to four or five generations back) occupy the intermediate position between men and the spirits and God. They “speak” a bilingual language of human beings whom they recently “left” through physical death, and of the spirits to whom they are now joined, or of God to whom they are now nearer than when they were physical men. Because of this ontological position, the living-dead constitute the largest group of intermediaries in African societies. This explains, to a large extent, the reason why African respect for the departed is so great and the cult connected with the living-dead is so deeply rooted in African life and thought (Mbiti 1970:230-231).

It is for this reason that Bali Nyonga ancestors are constantly appeased. It is not surprising, therefore, to encounter the theme of “ancestral neglect” as one of the recurrent causes of illness and misfortune during divination sessions.

The world of the living in Bali Nyonga is made up of human beings, animate and inanimate objects. The Bali Nyonga believe that human beings are powerless because they are controlled by the ancestral and supernatural worlds. They also believe that human beings are capable of drawing inspiration from the supernatural world to do good and evil. This explains the belief in witchcraft and the regular visits to diviners. The living appease the ancestors to have good health, good harvests, children, and successful lives. At the family level appeasements are carried out by family heads who use drinking horns or calabashes to pour libations to the living dead. During such rituals, a fowl or goat is offered to appease the ancestors.

Methodology

The corpus that we have used for this study was collected in the course of extensive fieldwork in various quarters in Bali Nyonga. After obtaining permission from both diviners and clients, our research team tape-recorded live performances during divination sessions involving diviners, clients, and (sometimes) relatives of clients. We also took down elaborate notes on the environment, the setting, and the nature of each performance. After we had recorded and collected material from twenty-one divination sessions, we then went ahead to transcribe, translate, and analyze the corpus of the twenty-one divination sessions. A substantial portion of the aesthetic value of the various divination rituals was lost during transcription and translation because not every aspect observed during the divination sessions could be written. The body postures and facial expressions of diviners and clients alike, for example, could not be aptly described or indicated in print. It has also been difficult to find exact equivalences of some *Mungaka* expressions in English. What we have done is provide literal instead of standard English expressions that represent such utterances.

Performance Aesthetics

Divination sessions in Bali Nyonga generally take place in the diviners' shrines. The people involved in Bali Nyonga divination rituals are the diviners, the clients (and most often) relatives of the clients. There is no fixed time for divination, but the very early hours of the morning are most preferable. The performance aesthetics of Bali Nyonga divination systems can best be appreciated by examining the various divination systems and locale of each divination shrine. There are different kinds of divination systems that use a variety of divination paraphernalia. These divination systems derive their names from the divination objects that each diviner uses. There is another category of diviners who do not use ritual objects, but simply divine by looking at the face or palm of the client.

Ndong-ngab

The *Ndong-ngab* divination is actually an antelope horn filled with tiny pebbles which produce a rattling sound when shaken. When a

client consults a diviner, the diviner shakes the horn to find out what the client's problem is. The findings are made by asking the horn a series of questions as the diviner shakes the horn. When he shakes the horn and no sound is produced, the horn is said to be silent, indicating a "yes" or positive response to whatever question was asked. On the other hand, if the horn is shaken and it produces a continuous sound when a question is asked, it indicates a negative response or refusal of the question.

Malam

Only two diviners in Bali Nyonga utilize the *malam* or mirror divination. The *malam* is actually a small square-shaped piece of vanished board about the size of an adult's palm. Its edges are decorated with fur and cowries. It is called a mirror because during divinations, images appear on it as if it were a TV screen. It is believed that these images can only be seen by a child who has neither been bitten by a dog, burnt by fire, nor involved in sexual activity. If a client has a child who fulfils the three conditions, he/she can take the child along for the divination or he/she can let the diviner's child read the images on the mirror.

When clients solicit divinations from diviners who use the mirror divination, they simply pose their problems and listen to the child who uses the mirror to report all what he/she sees and hears from the mirror. The diviner gives leading questions to the child to pose to the images he sees in the mirror while the client and diviner listen attentively to what the child says. Before the diviner gives the mirror to the child, he applies some greasy liquid on the surface of the board, which makes it glitter. He gives it first to the client and asks him/her whether they can see any images in the mirror before he hands it over to the child. Generally, adults report they have seen nothing on the mirror on account of the fact that they hardly meet the criteria outlined above. If the client, for example, seeks to establish the cause of a death, the image of the deceased person appears on the mirror. The dead person appears either in a coffin or on a bed. He/she is then ordered by the diviner, who uses the child as a medium, to say what killed him. The deceased goes ahead to reveal the cause of his/her death through the child. If the client is

lucky, the child may recognize the face of the killer or know his name. In the case of divination on theft, the child is able to see the thieves and the stolen articles. With some precision, depending on his intelligence, the child can describe the various areas through which the thief/thieves passed and where the stolen articles have been kept.

To'

Apart from the *Ndong-ngab* and *Malam* divinations, the Bali Nyonga practice *to'* divination. The *to'* is a silver, plastic, or calabash container about the size of an average drinking glass in which an assortment of items are put, shaken, thrown on the ground, and studied. The items include, but are not limited to, cowries of various sizes, pebbles, snail shells, and coins with holes in the middle. When the client poses a problem, the diviner shakes the container, pours its contents on the ground, and carries out the divination by looking at the positions of the various objects on the ground.

Mbum ngob

Divination in Bali Nyonga is also carried out by the use of *mbum-ngob* (the egg of a hen). We came across this divination system in Bawock during the fieldwork. The diviner was a woman known as *Na'ko'*. She is also allegedly a *Nkamsi* (clairvoyant) specializing in the problems of children and pregnancy. *Na'ko'* also handles cases of infertility and problems of men who were born with single testis. Expecting mothers consult her for pre-natal and anti-natal services.

The *mbum-ngob* diviner first places and holds two eggs vertically below the navel of a pregnant woman. Then she takes a second pair of eggs, holds them horizontally around the same position and examines them. By so doing, she is able to tell the exact position of the foetus in the womb. If she discovers that the child is not well placed or that it is in a bridge position, she employs her skills to rotate the child to the right position by inserting her hand in the woman's vagina. Many believe that she also detects infertility by simply looking at female clients. Hence, she falls in the category of Bali Nyonga diviners who are clairvoyant.

The performance aesthetics of these divination systems will not be complete if mention is not made of the ritual environment in the

various divination shrines. While some diviners use sections of their sitting rooms as shrines, others construct a separate structure either attached to, or apart from, the main house.

The diviner who uses the *malam* divination system, for example, has his shrine in a section of his sitting room, which is a fairly traditional house roofed with corrugated iron sheets. He sits either at the corner, near the front door, or near the back door. He explains that this is to enable the child, who must sit next to him, see well with the help of natural light. A kerosene lantern is usually used at night to provide light during divination sessions. This diviner's shrine has many attractive local decorations. As one enters the divinations shrine, he is greeted by two statues (one male and one female) facing each other. A local bag made of animal skin and extensively decorated with cowries hangs on the wall of the shrine. It is in this bag that the "mirror" is kept. There is a four-legged wooden table around where the diviner sits. There is also a variety of big, small, white, brown, black, and red bottles on top of the table. Some of the bottles contain concoctions made from barks of trees and herbs. The table is cluttered with clay pots of various sizes. Bamboo stools and a long bench (on which clients sit) are placed along two of the walls in the sitting area. A third wall has carved stools lined along it. It is in this section of the shrine that the diviner receives important notables since he is also a quarter-head. There is a hearth at the centre of the large room.

Na'ko's shrine is unique among Bali Nyonga diviners. Although *Na'ko'* can administer treatment and carry out limited divination in her living room, her shrine is located behind her house. It is actually a small hut attached to the main house and made from palm fronds. She receives only women inside the shrine; and clients must remove their shoes before they enter the shrine for consultations. Outside, near the shrine, are bamboo benches on which clients sit while waiting for their various turns to be consulted in the shrine. As the women wait outside, they roast green bananas mixed with palm oil. They also eat kola nuts with some soft leaves prescribed by the diviner. These leaves are associated with fertility; and it is believed that if a woman eats them without first taking them to the shrine, she would have diarrhoea. Pregnant women take along water in plastic

containers to the shrine. By the time they get back home, the water is believed to have become “good medicine” for their stomachs. Sometimes, when *Na’ko’* is happy, she asks the women to sing and dance to the tune of short didactic songs that she intones. After that, she gives them moral lessons about the evils of gossip and marital infidelity.

The rest of the shrines that have not been discussed are either attached to the main house or built apart, behind the main house. What is remarkable is the fact that most of these shrines are small mud-walled huts roofed with iron sheets or thatches. The huts are usually lower than the main house such that some demand (even the shortest diviner who can be less than 1.5m) to stoop when entering the shrine. Some of the shrines are so narrow that only one or two clients can go in at a time. The inner parts of the shrines are similar in that the ritual items that decorate the shrines’ interiors are almost the same. The items include statues of various sizes, clay pots, bottles, and candles. The shrines are also characterized by the pungent smell of perfumes and incense.

In all the divination systems, the clients play a very active role as they ask and answer questions that help the diviner to better divine. The multiplicity of divination methods in Bali Nyonga attest to the importance the people attach to divinations, probably because they deal with important issues in their lives. This is more likely to be true because most diviners are also herbalists who diagnose, prescribe, and administer herbal treatments. It is in this regard that Mbiti notes that:

To African societies, the medicine-men are the greatest gift and the most useful source of help. Other names for them are herbalists or traditional doctors. These are the specialists who have suffered most from European/American writers and speakers who so often and wrongly call them “witch-doctors” a term which should be buried and forgotten for ever (Mbiti 1969:166).

Form and Language

It was evident during fieldwork that the language used during these divination sessions is unique in its expressiveness and rich in its myriad cultural images. Bali Nyonga divination language constitutes

part of the socio-cultural existence and experience of the people. Bali Nyonga divination sessions have a recognizable structure. This is evident in the way the different divinations sessions begin, proceed, and end; and in the way language is used during performance sessions to obtain precise meaning. To better communicate both meaning and message diviners and clients employ supra-segmental features that constitute a vital aspect of communication.

Structure

The structure of a typical Bali Nyonga divination session is made up of the opening, the presentation of the problem, the solution, and the closing. The client mostly initiates the opening (or introduction) and (most often, like in the following example) takes the form of a greeting:

Client: Good morning, doctor
Diviner: Good morning. Welcome.
Horn, let us find out why this
nursing mother is here. (DS¹⁸ № 2)

In another example:

Client: [*knocking on the door*] *Kwa kwa*
Diviner: Yes.
Client: Are you there, doctor?
Something disturbs me much. (DS №.3)

And in the third example:

Client: May I come in?
Diviner: Yes, what is the news?
Client: I have come to make some
enquiries about my troubles. (DS № 14)

In the last example:

Client: Good morning doctor.
Diviner: Good morning. What should we do?

¹⁸ DS = Divination Session. We have preferred to use the word “client” for a person who seeks divination from a diviner. See Shaw, Rosalind (1991). “Splitting Truths from Darkness.” *African Divination Systems*. ed. Philip M. Peek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Client: I have come to find out about a boy who is far from here. (DS № 16)

Once the client introduces himself, the diviner goes ahead with the divination. Either the diviner discovers the problem or he is guided by the client to state the problem through a series of questions and answers. To discover the source of the client's problem, the diviner consults his divination objects as many times as possible. According to Aminu Emovon (1984:6), when diviners throw their divination objects as many times as possible on the floor, their intention is to ensure perfect diagnosis. Emovon observes that:

Some diviners with whom I discussed the point revealed that the second, third, and the fourth throws and the analyses are usually to confirm, expatiate on, or to refute the message of the first throw. When the diviner is certain that he has the problem, he looks for the solution.

The solution depends on a number of factors. First, the source or cause of the problem has to be determined. If, for example, the problem is caused by ancestral neglect, the client is counselled on what to do. Secondly, the diviner has to find out if the problem is such that it can be treated. The solution to the client's problem may exist in many forms. There is the material solution that may consist of mere advice which the diviner gives the client. Sometimes the diviner treats an illness instantly by incising some part of the body and rubbing ground concoctions on it to protect the client. Again, portions or amulets can be given to the client to heal or protect her. Alternatively, the diviners can keep the patient in protective custody for a while to treat her. However, not all problems have solutions. While some honest diviners explain the impossibility of getting a solution, others exploit their patients by demanding money from their family.

There is no strict format to terminate divination sessions. However, like the examples below reveal, particular features do recur in the closing of divination sessions. Quite often, the diviner reassures the client of his competence:

Diviner: Have you heard how this horn is silent? It indicates that what I have said is true. It is Dr. Stephen Foncham who

has said it. I do not like lies. If you have heard me, then all will be well. This is all I can say.¹⁹ (DS № 1)

In another example:

Diviner: I am not a magician. I work as it shows. When I give you my medicine, drink it only with your husband. If you jump about, you will spoil the medicine and so defame my character. (DS № 6)

After re-instilling hope in clients, the diviners also give instructions:

Diviner: Bring seventy-francs, two bottles of *ngwad-badon* (castor oil) and a hen because she is a woman. The ball is in your court. (DS № 5)

Or:

Diviner: That your husband who has impregnated you should come along with you tomorrow. Have you understood? The state of this baby is not good. When coming bring two thousand francs so that I can turn the baby. Also bring a container for your medicine.

Some diviners, like in DS №17, acknowledge their source of divination towards the end of the divination session in a bid to inflate their prestige:

Diviner: This my horn is not made by me. It was given to me by my master. What I am doing, my son too will do the same in my absence ...

Most diviners end the divination sessions with a note of hope and emphasis especially when the client promises to carry out the prescribed instructions. On their part, the clients simply accept what the diviners reveal and thank them before leaving.

Diction

At a surface level, the diction of Bali Nyonga divinations appears to be simple; but the words do not necessarily mean what they say. Divination language is replete with a diction that is characterized by hidden and coded meaning. Some unique aspects of diction that

¹⁹ We are unable to provide an appendix of the 21 divination sessions we witnessed and recorded during fieldwork because of page and word restrictions. We have, however, utilized the translated version of some divination sessions and left out the original *Mungaka* versions that we recorded.

contribute to the aesthetics of the language in divination sessions include imagery, greeting patterns, exclamations, repetitions, and rhetorical questions.

Imagery

Recurrent images of impending danger abound in the language of Bali Nyonga divination. In DS № 10, for example, the client is asked to go and trace the root of the *egusi* (melon) plant. It is an indication that the client's task will not be easy because the *egusi* imagery symbolizes his family tree whose roots he must trace. As it is difficult to trace the roots of the *egusi* plant, so too will it be difficult to trace the roots of his family tree. In the same divination session, the client is told that if she delays, fire will burn down her house. The fire imagery here symbolizes destruction and death. The diviner uses this dreadful image to spur the client to act immediately.

In DS № 13, the diviner use the image of a speaking corpse lying on the bed. This image evokes pity, fear, awe, and mystery. In DS № 14, we encounter the image of a rolling stone that suggests danger in the phrase, "you should not be afraid that a stone will roll and crush you." Another image in DS № 21 mentions a drunkard staggering late at night to his home while his children turn in their sleep. This image evokes family anxiety and restlessness. It suggests irresponsibility, torture, and emotional pain.

Apart from the evocation of images that hint at negative things, divination sessions also utilize images of procreation like the one that refers to the moon. In DS № 8, for example, the client says, "it is three months since I've not seen the moon..." The moon here, which means she is pregnant, signifies fertility, procreation, and rebirth. There is also the image of a laying hen in DS № 6:

Diviner: If things run well and God is on our side, you will see things yourself. When the hen will start to lay, you will stay only for two months and I expect you back here to give me wine ... you will have a baby boy.

Metaphor

The use of metaphor abounds in the utterances of many a diviner. In DS № 3, for example, the diviner says, "...when you see someone abandon his house then the house is leaking. What type of

rain has beaten you? The diviner would simply have said, “I understand you have a problem. What is your problem? But he does not. Instead, he resorts to an indirect method of talking. In another instance, a child endowed with supernatural powers is referred to as “a child with four eyes” (DS № 15). In DS № 6, the word “know” in “When I give my medicine, drink only with your husband and know only your husband.” “know” here is a metaphor for the sexual union between the client and her husband.

Proverbs

Diviners in these divination sessions also employ a variety of proverbs that enrich their language and make the interaction between the client and the diviner interesting and fascinating. For example, in DS № 16, when the diviner says, “*I ni ndẓu bon sun bi be bo ni fukub ṣisa*” (He eats with those his friends with a long spoon), the person in question should be careful with his friends. In DS № 6 when the diviner says, “*Mu ma ndin ma nun nu ma bam u bo*” (I cannot put anything into your bag), he is simply saying, “I cannot say you have a problem when there is none.” We also find the proverb, “*Su-ti-suti ṃfed nun-nun*” (he who eats with a thief will one day become a thief) in DS № 16.

Greeting Patterns

Greeting exchanges between clients and diviners are characterized by ironical, paradoxical, and ambiguous utterances. In DS № 5, for instance, we have the following greeting exchange between the client and the diviner:

Woman:	<i>U la'ndi dokta</i> (Good morning, diviner)
Diviner:	<i>Nn, bi ti' nsa' ko</i> (Yes, what is the news)
Woman:	<i>Bi ku mbo mbonḅkad</i> (We are fine)

There appears to be no relationship between the client's greetings and the diviner's responses. Quite obviously the client has a problem, yet she says “we are fine.” Another interesting example is in DS № 11:

Ba:	[<i>knocking on the door</i>] kwa kwa
Dokta:	<i>Nn</i> (Yes).

Ba: *U tsi nu' dokta* (Are you there diviner)?

Dokta: *Miya Miya, ba* (Softly softly, father).

Here, although the client sees the diviner, he still asks him whether he is there. Instead of the diviner saying he is in, he rather says that client should come in gently. In DS № 14, when the client asks, “May I come in” and the diviner says, “Yes, what is the news?” the diviner’s response seems to be at odds with the client’s question. In effect, the client’s intention is not to ask a question but to announce his presence.

Exclamations

Exclamations are used by diviners to express powerful emotions, to indicate urgency in a matter, to signify danger, and sometimes to reaffirm that diviner’s competence. In DS № 21, for example (after shaking the horn) the diviner exclaims, “Woe! Mungwi le ka fo’ me’ mfo’ se bon bul!” (Woe! That woman has cursed your children!) This exclamation indicates the gravity of the problem and the situation. In DS № 6, when the diviner shakes his horn and exclaims, “Wa! As I have told you, I am a doctor ... I am not a magician,” he intends to reiterate the vital role he is playing and his competence as a diviner.

Repetition

When a diviner wants to ensure that his findings are accurate, he addresses certain questions repeatedly to his invisible (supernatural) audience and the client. In addition, diviners use repetition to emphasize a point, instil fear and hope in the client, and as a means of threat. When the diviner wants to ensure that his divination is perfect, it is common for him to repeat the questions, “What I have told this man/woman, will it work? Is it true?” Such phrases are repeated as many times as the diviner requires some clarifications from his supernatural sources. In DS № 5, the diviner addresses his spirits in the following words: “*Ndzɔ! Kwa dʒan le a bo dʒan N̄ikob e?/Kwa dʒan N̄ikob e?*” (Ndzo! Is this illness from God?/Is it from God?). This repetition indicates how determined the diviner is as he tries to get an accurate revelation. Repetition also serves for emphasis as in DS № 1 where the expression, “*U ju’e* (have you understood) is employed six times by the diviner to articulate a serious note of

warning to the client. Again, in DS № 2, repetition is used to instil fear when the diviner repeats the phrase “Have no fear” three times during the divination session.

Questions

Asking questions is a dominant technique that is employed in the interaction between clients and Bali Nyonga diviners. Questions that diviners pose exist at three different levels. First, there are the questions directed to the client by the diviner. Next, there are those the diviners pose to the spirits, and finally those the client asks the diviner.

The questions the diviner asks the client are not readymade, but occur naturally during the divination. Most of these questions are posed in the middle of divination sessions. For example, in DS №1 the first question the diviner asks the client is, “*Mu’ ni mbati nga ndu u ya e* (Where is your husband)? Without waiting for a reply, adds, “*U bo ni bumban issue’ e*” (How many husbands have you)? Obviously, these questions are not intended to solicit facts from the client. Rather, they are purposeful questions that indicate the diviner already knows something concerning the female client. Just like hospital consultations where patients are questioned by the medical doctor before proper diagnosis, so too do diviners pose questions to their clients. However, this question/answer technique can also be used to solicit information from the client:

Diviner: You have had some medicine from the hospital. Have you not just returned from the hospital? DS № 6)

Questions directed by the diviner to the invisible spirits or entities are usually rhetorical in nature. In this case, the diviner simply wants the spirits to confirm what he has earlier said or seen. This “knowledge (Shaw 1991: 147) of how to interpret came from the spirits ...” Shaw goes ahead to explain that:

The diviner’s perception of the relationship between the microcosm... and a wider reality, a perception which is attributed to the external agency of the spirits is “revelatory” in Turner’s terms, although this revelation is largely confined to the diviner. To the client, the diviner’s barely audible prayers and cryptic manipulation of

pebbles underscore the “darkness” surrounding the source of the diviner’s knowledge, but there is a movement towards clarity as the session progresses ... (147)

This is evident in DS № 6 when the diviner addresses the horn: “Should she continue with European drugs or should she pursue traditional herbs?” Also in DS № 3, the diviner asks, “Will this gentleman have peace after sitting down with the successor?” These types of questions seem to be an attempt by the diviner to make the client believe that what he is saying is actually true because it is not coming from him.

The kinds of questions that are directed by the client to the diviner are usually to clarify a point that is not quite clear to the client. The mirror divination makes exclusive use of this nature of questioning:

Child: *[looking in the mirror]* They have come

Diviner: How many of them are there? Are they men or women?

Child: There are two of them, one man, one woman.

Diviner: What do you see in the man’s hand?

Child: I have seen jugs.

Diviner: What is in the woman’s hand?

Child: I have seen only jugs.

Diviner: You haven’t seen a glass? How many jugs are there?

Child: There are four. (DS № 18)

The reliability and authenticity of this technique is evident in DS № 13 where the questions are posed directly to the deceased’s spirit which gives first hand information as to the cause of the man’s death:

Child: *[looking at the ‘mirror’]* Ba Foteke, appear so that I can see you.

Diviner: Has he come?

Child: Yes, he has come. *[She repeats after the diviner]*

The family of E.N. have come to find out what killed you. That you should prove or show what killed you.

Diviner: Has he come?

Child: He has come.

Diviner: Is he on the coffin or in it?

Child: He is in the coffin.

Diviner: Tell the deceased to come out of the coffin and sit on the bed ...

Is he out?

Child: [*to the diviner*] Yes, he has come out. [*to the deceased*] Your relatives have come to find out what killed you. If it is a curse, appear with it. If not then come alone ... he has come

Diviner: [*tells the child to repeat after him*]

Child: If you were killed by enemies, bring them and show me. If it was a curse, equally come along with the curse.

Diviner: Has he come?

Child: Yes, he has brought along a bundle of something in his hand.

Diviner: A bundle? What does it look like?

Child: It is like grass.

Personification

All divination objects are personified. The diviners talk to or about them as if they are human. “The horn says” and “*Ndzo* says” are common expressions in divination language. At one time, the horns are described as silent: “Have you heard how the horn is silent?” (DS № 6) The following expressions that have been randomly selected from the corpus show some instances of personification: “Horn, let us find out why this nursing mother is here ... tell me how the exam will be,” “*Ndzo*! This woman wants to make some enquiries. Let us look into her matter,” and “The horn says that your journey will be a good one.”

Dialogue

The dialogue in Bali Nyonga divination sessions operates at two levels—between the diviner and the client and between the diviner and the invisible entities. At the first level, when the client introduces himself, the diviner finds out his problem and gives him feedback in the form of a dialogue. The client equally asks and answers questions posed by the diviner in a dialogue. At the second level, the diviner is actually involved in what seems to be a monologue because his audience does not see his interlocutors. The audience or clients only hear the diviner ask and answer questions from invisible presences.

Sometimes, a diviner goes into a long spontaneous monologue and incantation when he is carrying out a protection ritual. During such sessions, the diviner communicates with the spirits in coded language.

Digression

If we consider the art of divination a story, then the digression in divination would refer to the phenomenon whereby diviners bring in other stories or lines of thought within the divination sessions to either complement a point or throw more light to the main discussion. According to S.A. Babalola (1966) diviners “wander at will from theme to theme apparently in order to provide spice of variety especially relief from tragic themes, to create suspense , and/or to teach a moral.” The diviner uses the digression in DS № 1 below to advise, moralize, and to relief the tension in the divination session:

If you abandon him and return to your house, then all will be well. Do you hear? You have children with your husband and not with your boyfriend. I am advising you that if you want my medicine to perform well, you must return to your husband and be honest to him. If you catch any disease, it will equally affect your husband. Why is it that you are complaining while you husband does not? Have you heard?

Since it is believed that some diviners have the ability to see into the past and future, it is quite possible that digressions in divination sessions are part of the divination process itself.

Supra-Segmental Features

Supra-segmental features are those non-verbal aspects of language that help in effective communication. In Bali Nyonga divination, they include pitch, tone, face and body gestures. They complement verbal language to communicate a variety of messages.

When the diviner becomes aware of a very serious or sorrowful situation, he speaks in a low pitch and a very sombre tone. This is to allow the client to realize the gravity of the situation and the necessity to act promptly according to what the divination has prescribed. When the diviner wants to warn the client, he changes his tone from

low to high. When the diviner gives advice he speaks calmly but when he makes a prescription, he uses emphatic language.

Facial and body gestures accompany diviner's utterances during divination sessions. Unfortunately, they can only be appreciated during live divination sessions when face-to-face contact is made with the diviners. However, a general description of what goes on during divination sessions will be useful. When a diviner shakes his head during a divination session, it shows pity or bad news, while a nod shows confidence, understanding, empathy, and acceptance. The opening and squinting of eyes and the titling of the head from side to side indicate a difficult task. Usually when a diviner is chasing away evil spirits he perspires profusely and his breathing becomes laboured. Sarcastic laughter indicates ironic situations and danger, while normal laughter reveals hope and optimism.

Conclusion

The language in which divination rituals are conducted in Bali Nyonga is *Mungaka* (the Bali Nyonga language) which is exceedingly rich in figurative language. More importantly, the language used in the divination sessions and the divination rituals themselves constitute an integral aspect of the people's socio-cultural and psychological existence.

Our study has also revealed that divination in the *Mungaka* language is replete with imagery, metaphor, proverbs, greeting patterns and a variety of supra-segmental features that enrich and complement the interaction between diviners and their clients and that enhance the divination performances. We can thus infer that the language of Bali Nyonga divination has its own cultural and psychological influence on the people and consequently constitutes part of the people's cosmology. Hence, we can assert that the practice of divination in Bali Nyonga is connected to and associated with "actions and ritual beliefs [that] express entire world views ... [whose] frequent occurrence in a culture implies a great deal about that culture's underlying religious attitude" (Zuesse 1979). Divination in Bali Nyonga is thus a system of understanding how the self is related to otherness. It becomes evident as Zuesse "(1979:232) indicates that "each of these ways of understanding the self and its

relation to otherness is in fact an individual perspective on the universe; that these perspectives are so elaborately developed to their separate conclusions often within the same society.

This study has identified the *Ndong-ngab*, *malam, to'*, and *mbum-ngob* divination systems as the main traditional forms of divination in Bali Nyonga. While our findings may not have been conclusive, this research does not preclude the existence of other kinds of divination systems whose practitioners may have migrated from neighbouring villages and settled in Bali Nyonga. The *Ndong-ngab*, *malam, to'*, and *mbum-ngob* divination systems, like the *Ifa* (Western Nigeria), *Fa* (Sierra Leone), *Temme* (Dahomey), *Yamba* (Cameroon), and *Nyole* (Eastern Uganda) divinations, have remained relatively unchanged over the decades, as far as practice, apprenticeship, ritual implements, technique, and interpretation are concerned.

The most obvious aspects of change as far as divination in Bali Nyonga is concerned appear to be in the content of divinations and apprenticeship. Whereas divination practice decades ago in Bali Nyonga was hereditary (that is divination secrets were handed from father to son, today it is "like any apprentice learning a profession, the pupil of divination has to make payments to his master. These payments include money, fowls, small pots of cooked game and 'plenty mimbo' ..." (Gufler 1995). While the cause of death, infertility, neglect of ancestors, and witchcraft may have constituted the major reasons for consulting diviners decades ago in the relatively small village environment that Bali Nyonga was decades ago, the transformation of Bali Nyonga from a rural village environment to a semi-urban centre has changed the reasons why a majority of clients consult diviners. Diviners are most likely nowadays, as our research data revealed, to be consulted on matters associated with theft, the search for jobs, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, accumulation of property, and so on.

Our research and fieldwork have equally revealed that the Bali Nyonga regularly consult diviners even when they are traditionalists or Christians who go to church regularly. Even when clients doubted the validity of a diviner's revelations, they continued to consult other diviners until they were satisfied. The implication here is that clients approach diviners with fixed mind states which they want to validate.

Our data also revealed that women, more than men, tend to be the dominant divination clients in Bali Nyonga divination sessions. Perhaps, it could be the consequence of the data collected, but our data did not show that men more than women consult diviners. That is why, like Shaw (1985), we tend to be of the opinion that “the majority of private diviners’ clients are women, usually with sick children or reproductive problems, and are thereby regarded with suspicion by men, who see them as liable to make use of the negative ethical potential of diviners’ knowledge.”

Evidently, a good number of Bali Nyonga diviners practice more than one divination system. These diviners act as therapists who counsel and assist clients to solve their individual problems. Though there is some element of guesswork, especially on the part of charlatan diviners who use leading questions, common sense, and psychology to diagnose clients’ problems, the diviners encountered in this study “may well be an important vehicle for culture contact and innovation, though their role in culture change has generally been ignored. But the profound motivation of their quest is to discover the deeper levels of existence and to articulate these levels in a systematic unification of understanding. For this reason, their wisdom is often esoteric and multilayered and has an initiatic structure” (Zuesse 1979).

This study excluded important aspects like aesthetics, structure, liminality, public divination, and cosmological symbolism in Bali Nyonga divination. Future researchers in this very fascinating subject would explore these and other aspects of Bali Nyonga divination that this research has not broached. It suffices to mention that although divination in Bali Nyonga appears to be a contemporary practice that addresses the day-to-day existence of the people, it is also, nonetheless, a continuous transformational process that is firmly rooted in the people’s cultural, ancestral, historical, and cosmological existence.

Chapter Four

Marriage and Widowhood Rites in Bali Nyonga

Elias M. Nwana & Vincent L. Nwana

Introduction & Background

This chapter is primarily a narrative of two important rites of passage that affect a majority of the womenfolk in Bali-Nyonga, namely, marriage & widowhood. The discourse presented in this chapter is underpinned by the geographical, historical and migratory context of the people of Bali Nyonga as outlined in the introduction of this book. In an age in which traditions are fast being diluted by the ever-increasing force of globalisation, the primary aim of this paper is to document the rites associated to marriage and widowhood as received mainly from oral literature for posterity. Whilst we do not comprehensively explore the impact of history, geography and ethnicity on marriage and widowhood rites, we nevertheless posit several factors which have undoubtedly contributed to their conception and adjustments through the generations. The secondary aim therefore of this paper is to provide foundation material in the hope that it triggers further research into the impact of these factors on the institution of marriage and some of the anthropological and socio-economic questions related to marriage and widowhood rites are posed towards the end of the respective sections.

Background & Historical Context

Bali Nyonga is a conglomeration of several ethnic groups which include, *inter alia*, Sang, Ti, Won, Ngod, Ngiam, Tikali, Peli, Yani & Leng, Kwen, Keyang, Mbeluh and Mbufong. Whilst these groups come from various historical origins, they are now so firmly integrated within the Bali Nyonga umbrella that they see themselves as a single ethnic group loyal to the institutions of a single unified chieftaincy and speak the common language, Mungaka. There are other ethnic groups in Bali sub-division that are not loyal to the Bali chieftdom and its institutions. The most notable of these are the

Bawock people and the Bossah people. There is also a small group of semi-nomadic Mbororo cattle herders who are settled in the sub-division. According to statistics from the official Cameroon Census published in 2006, the combined population of these three ethnic groups represents about 1% of the total population²⁰ of Bali sub division.

Bali sub division is bordered by several smaller villages such as Batibo, Nsongwa, Chomba, Ngembu, as well as a very cosmopolitan urban town called Bamenda. Bamenda is the administrative capital of the North West Province of Cameroon which offers more job opportunities than its surrounding villages. As such it has attracted several individuals and groups of people from different parts of the country. The cosmopolitan nature of the town brings with it different cultures and religious beliefs that, given its proximity to Bali Nyonga, must have an influence on some of its cultures. It is for example, not uncommon for Bali Nyonga indigenes to marry partners from neighbouring villages or even countries.

Historically, the people of Bali Nyonga belong to the Chamba Leko-speaking people, who claim to have migrated between 1825 and 1835 from Chamba, a Sudanese group whose territory borders between Nigeria and Cameroon to the north, near Yola in Nigeria and Garoua in Cameroon, to the Bamenda grasslands. They are said to have been driven southwards by Fulani invaders during the second quarter of the 19th century. Zintgraff, the famous German explorer, dated the migration to 75 years before he visited Bali Nyonga, based in its current location in 1889 (Hunt 1925).

This brief resume of Bali Nyonga sets the context that should be borne in mind as the reader digests the remainder of this chapter. This context can be captured in the following two bullet points:

- Marriage and widowhood rites would most likely have been influenced by the cultures of the different ethnic groups that hosted the collective people of Bali Nyonga during their migration south to the current location;

²⁰ Derived from population data as reported in the “Annuaire Statistique du Cameroon (2006)” from the Institute National de la Statistique du Cameroon

- By virtue of Bali's proximity to Bamenda and other neighbouring villages, together with the increase trend of intercultural marriages and Christianity, will almost certainly result in further 'adulterations' to the marriage and widowhood rites which are currently considered as baseline.

Most of the research carried out in pulling this paper was conducted by interviewing several individuals considered in the authors' views as very knowledgeable on the cultures of Bali Nyonga people. These persons, some of whom have since passed away, provided somewhat purist opinions of marriage and widowhood rites. Interestingly, this purist view is largely corroborated by the seminal paper on matrimonial law in Bali by (1970). On the basis of the corroboration of the rites recorded in this paper with those contained in Rubin's, it is fair to assume that the rites contained in this paper had their greatest adherence periods between the 1950's and the 1970's. This period can be viewed as the median period of the Bali Nyonga in its present location. It therefore represents a period where the different traditions absorbed by the nomadic Bali Nyonga people enjoyed a steady state. The likelihood of the rites described in this paper happening verbatim in present day Bali Nyonga is low. However, most traditional marriages and death celebrations incorporate aspects of the rites and cultures contained in this paper.

Rubin (1970:70-71) outlines the four different types of marriages namely: (1) *Regular marriage* where a man and woman marry with the consent of both their families. The consent is usually agreed by way of a bride price; (2) Marriage by elopement – which occurs when agreement of both families is not reached but the two parties involved proceed irrespective of the lack of agreement; (3) marriage of a divorcee; and (4) marriage by inheritance of a widow. For further details on these marriages, and particularly their validity vis-à-vis Cameroon law, the reader is advised to refer to Rubin (1970). The marriage rites in this paper largely relate to the *regular marriage* whilst the widowhood rites are to almost all the types of marriages stated above.

Stages in Marriage Rites

It is worth noting that marriage in Bali Nyonga is not just a permanent union between the bride and bridegroom: it is a lifelong union between the two contracting families of the suitors. This fact will become apparent in the succeeding discourse.

Investigation and Background

The typical age of a consenting Bali Nyonga bride is between 16 and 21 and the groom is usually between the ages of 19 and 30. The initiation of marriage is generally between the bride and groom who would normally have had a period of courtship and agree to embark on the journey of marriage. The bride-to-be and groom-to-be notify their parents, *batangwi* (father's sisters – *tangwi*, singular) and *babambod* (father's younger brothers; *bambod*, singular). The two families then set about carrying out some detailed investigations of one another. The aim of the investigations is to gain a better understanding of the other family and also to gain assurance that their son or daughter is going to be marrying into a loving setting.

What do the families look for during these investigations? Firstly, they seek to establish whether the other family has incidents of witchcraft practices. Traces of such incidents may lead to cold-feet from the other family. Secondly, they attempt to establish whether there have been any occurrences of suicide or incest in the other family. These are taboo factors which indicate unsuitability of the other family. Again, this can result in a death knell of the proposed marriage. It is the wish of every Bali Nyonga parent to ensure continuity of offspring. This translates in the investigative stages of marriage to carrying out a covert analysis of the health of the other family. Cases of *vu-tu* (epilepsy) and sickle cell disease are investigated. The prevalence of HIV and AIDs related disease adds another dimension to the family investigations.

A family may choose to not give their blessing towards a marriage union if they are uncomfortable with the outcomes of their investigations. This may lead to a collapse of the proposed marriage, or alternatively, the boy and girl choose to 'elope' (see later section of this paper) and cement their union without the blessing of their families. If however, both families are happy with the results of their

background research, they proceed with second stage of the rites of marriage.

It is interesting to note that in Western cultures as well as other Middle and Far Eastern Cultures, these pre-checks exist under the guise of *pre-marital health checks*. In Western Europe and North America, pre-marital health checks are often done by individuals in order to assure the couples that their offspring are free of congenital ailments. In other countries such as the United Arab Emirates, pre-marital health checks have been institutionalized in law and the government has issued guidelines on medical checks to its citizens. The primary difference between these checks in other cultures and those expressed in this paper is the covertness that accompanies the checks on the family of the bride.

The authors note with interest that in contemporary Bali Nyonga, pre-marital medical checks are increasingly being performed openly and in a more scientific manner. The level of education of the average Bali Nyonga indigene is rising and with this, there is a higher adoption of scientific methods of proof.

Pre-Engagement (*Cho Mungwi*)

The second stage of marriage in Bali Nyonga is called *cho mungwi* and is also commonly referred to as “*knock door*.” It is essentially a familiarisation visit which usually takes place in the evening in the common room of the head of the bride-to-be’s compound on a pre-arranged day. The groom-to-be’s relatives, typically his father, *bambods* & *tangwis*, arrive the ceremony with a jug of palm wine. Welcome pleasantries are exchanged between the head of the girl’s family (the main host) and his in-laws-to-be. The main host then calls for his relatives, typically his brothers and sisters to join him in the common room. This is the first official meeting of both sides of the families and the assembly is usually surprisingly quiet. The silence is broken by one of the girl’s relatives who would typically ask for the purpose of the visit. The leader of the groom-to-be’s party responds to the question. The response to the somewhat rhetorical question is usually clad in idiomatic language. A common idiom used is as follows: “*We have discovered a calabash bowl for moulding foo-foo corn in this compound and have come to seek it.*” The spokesperson for the bride-to-be’s family

would assume a similar tone and proudly announce that his compound is awash with fine calabash bowls and that visitors would have to be more specific about their desired calabash bowl. At this point, all but one of the girls of child-bearing age in the compound are summonsed to appear before the gathering. Drama is guaranteed as the girls file through one by one in front of the visiting family. As each girl passes by, the host family enquires whether the girl on parade is their desired bride. The answer from the visitors will invariably be "No." Then finally, the bride-to-be is ushered into the gathering to universal acclaim by the groom-to-be's family.

The host family would then ask the bride to be to confirm that she "knows these people". She would typically smile sheepishly, assume an innocent stance and pretend not to know most of the people assembled. After a brief period she would admit to have met one in the assembled crowd, and would point to her suitor after some coaxing from her family. This admittance is accompanied by clapping and cheering from the visitors. This evokes shyness in the bride-to-be who quickly runs out of the common room. If the host family are satisfied with their investigations and proceedings so far, they would give their blessing for the marriage to go ahead and the palm wine brought by the suitor's family would be drunk. Cola-nuts and merry making also mark this acceptance of the union.

Not all *knock door* visits end successfully. Failure of such a visit is usually as a result of incomplete checks by the bride-to-be's family. Not wanting to burn any bridges, the host family does not let their visitors know the real reason for the failure. They provide an excuse that the gathering is missing some key family members who have not yet been consulted on the matter of marriage. Without these consultations, they could not provide their blessing. They would then decline to drink the palm wine that was brought. The groom-to-be's family would consider it shameful to take back the jug of palm wine and will insist that it be drunk, not as a symbol of engagement but as a drink shared between friends. The girl's family would accept the kind offer and the spokesperson will insist that the palm wine is shared in the spirit of friendship and not as an acceptance of engagement. The groom-to-be's family departs at the end of the day pondering why the marriage was put on hold. There would be some

behind-the-scenes investigations to find out the real reason for the unsuccessful visit. Usually if the decline of the engagement drinks will not be down to any fundamental reason such as the taboo factors discussed in Section 0 above: it would more likely be down to some petty disputes or conflicts such as land disagreements between members of the families. These disputes are quickly resolved to the satisfaction of both families and a second *knock-door* visit arranged. The go-ahead for the marriage is given during this visit and all is set for the third stage of engagement.

Engagement (Nu Ndu Mungwi)

The third stage of marriage is referred to as ‘drinking of the marriage wine’ (*Nu ndu mungwi*) and the ceremony takes place within three months of the *knock-door*. Central to the occasion is the arrangement for the payment of the bride price (usually in cash), the provision of a native hoe with its handle coated with cam-wood, the provision of palm oil (4 to 6 20L litre jugs).

The setting for the *ndu mungwi* ceremony is similar to that of the *cho mungwi* ceremony. Most families arrange for the ceremony to take place between 4 and 6pm on *Ntanmbutu*, the day proceeding the Bali Nyonga Market day. The preparations for the ceremony are set in stall by the head of the bride’s family informing the bride’s mother that some very important guests will be visiting on *Ntanmbutu*. This coded message is fully understood and the bride’s mother ensures that everything is ready for the important visit.

On the appointed day and time, the groom’s family arrives with drinks and kola-nuts and are welcomed by the hosts. All members of the girl’s family are also in sitting. The remainder of this occasion is best articulated by providing a typical (representative) dialogue between different members of both families as depicted below.

Head of Bride’s family:	“So, why are you here again with a jug of palm wine?”
Groom’s family spokesman:	“Papa, we saw a beautiful piece of calabash here for moulding foo-foo corn and have come to beg for it”
Head of Bride’s	“Who is it? What is her name” (<i>Usually</i>

family: *asked with a straight face, feigning ignorance of the bride's identity)*

Groom's family
spokesman: "Nabila" *(This is a representative name. Nabila is invited into the assembly and she obliges usually with shyness in her disposition)*

Head of Bride's
family *(Speaking to Nabila):* "Nabila, These people have come to the compound with a jug of palm wine because of you. What have you got to say about it?" *(Typical tense pause...)*

Bride *(Nabila, whispers to the head of the family)* "I would like you to drink it." *(This would be greeted by cheers from the groom's family)*

Head of Bride's
family *(Speaking to bride, Nabila):* "Are you sure? There is only a one-way route to my stomach. Whatever goes into my stomach can never come out again."

Bride *(Nabila, whispers to the head of the family)* "Yes Papa, I am sure that I want you to drink it."

Head of Bride's
family *(Speaking to bride, Nabila):* "I insist that drinking of this cup will mean that I will entertain no further visits from these people on account of you changing your mind (about this marriage)"

Bride *(Nabila, whispers to the head of the family)* "Papa, I promise that they will not be coming back on that account"

Head of Bride's
family *(Speaking to bride, Nabila):* "Ok – Don't say I haven't warned you. If you are so sure that you want me to drink, then uncork the jug and fill this special family cup" *(Handing his traditional cow-born cup to Nabila)*

Head of Bride's
family *(Speaking to bride, Nabila):* "Nabila, drink of this family cup and pass it on to your suitor"

Bride *(Nabila, whispers to the head of the family)* "Thank you, Papa" *(Nabila drinks and passes it on to the groom)*

The drinking of the wine by the bride and groom represents the sealing of the marriage bond. Happiness fills the room, cola-nuts are exchanged and shared and all concerned eat, drink and start making merry. Midway through the merry-making, the house is called to order and decorum is required! The following dialogue ensues.

Head of Bride's family: "I require one bag and half a rope as bride price for my daughter" (*The groom's family seek permission to go out and discuss an appropriate response to the bride price that has been demanded of them.*)

Groom's family spokesman: "My brothers and sisters, we have not refused your request, but we would like to remark that times are hard and money is hard to come by in this country these days. The days of slave trade have gone and we have not come to buy your daughter but to take her as a wife."

Head of Bride's family: "We did not congregate here to engage in time-wasting. If your family is too poor, then go back to your compound in your poverty."

Groom's family spokesman: "Papa, I thought I had the floor. I am not saying that we are so poor that we cannot marry your daughter. I was only remarking that ours is a decent family: we give our daughters out to marriage and we do not sell them. But since it is our custom that some money be given as bride price for our daughter, half a rope." (*Half a rope is equivalent to 50,000 FCFA*).

Head of Bride's family: "These people came here for a joke. I suggest they take their joke somewhere else"

Groom's family spokesman: (*Puts hand in pocket and offers 100,000FCFA, twice the amount that he mentioned earlier to the host and proudly declares that ...*) "We did not come here to portray our poverty. We came to take a wife"

Head of Bride's family:

(Counts the money, calls the members of his family for a private discussion behind the house and returns to say...) "Bride price is an on-going process that will end when we all die. We do not need to squeeze you dry because we know that you have a duty to look after our daughter. We want to inform you that we do not want to hear any complains of headache from our daughter." (This is a tacit way of agreeing the bride price and warning against ill-treatment or molestation of their daughter.

The celebrations continue at this point as the marriage has effectively been sealed. The reader may have noticed a patrilineal undertone in the discourse since the bride is a child of the father's compound. However on this day, special recognition is also afforded to the bride's maternal family by providing her maternal grand-father with a twenty-five litre jug of palm wine (*Ndu Dob Mun*) and a token cash payment (*Nkap Dob Mun*) of about 25,000 FCFA. All parties are now in unison and ready for the final stage of marriage, the escorting of the bride to the groom.

Escorting of the Bride

The traditional day for escorting the bride to her husband's compound is *Nkobtan*. Prior to this day, detailed arrangements are made by both families. On the groom's side, the family will ensure that the compound, and indeed the streets leading to the compound are swept clean in preparation for welcoming their new bride. They should also be armed with sufficient money (preferably changed into small denominations) which will act as useful bait to entice their bride during the drawn-out process of receiving their bride into the compound. It is also customary for the groom's family to buy a hen and some new mats for the bride's bed. Preparatory activities on the bride's side include the preparation of a parting meal and choosing of the bridesmaids to accompany her during the procession to her groom's compound. The bridesmaids are usually the bride's maternal cousins. Younger boys from her maternal side may also perform the

role of bridesmaids, although this is only done when there is a shortage of girls.

Strictly speaking, the bride should not be aware of the day on which she will be escorted to her marital compound: Customs expect that she should be taken by surprise, but in practice this is not the case, not least because preparatory activities would be a big hint for the bride. Initial activities for the procession commence at about 7pm, twilight, when the bride's family gathers around for a meal in the family common room. Whilst dinner is progressing, two of the bride's paternal aunts (*batangwi*) take her to the back of the house, wash her and rub her with palm oil. The bride usually cries during this process. She's either feigning the tears in pretence that she is unaware of the march or is genuinely upset at the prospect of leaving her childhood home to a new one. After the anointment with oil, she's dressed up and the procession is ready to begin. The bride is given final advice and blessing by the head of the family and she begins the procession to her husband's compound accompanied by her bridesmaids (*fah-ndams*), paternal aunts (*batangwi*) and maternal aunts (*nah mbods*).

The procession is accompanied by singing of happy wedding songs to notify neighbours and passers-by that a bride is being escorted to her marital home. The bride's wedding party approaches the groom's compound and stops short if it by a distance of about 100m. From this distance, one of the bride's paternal aunts or *tangwis* shouts at the top of her voice to notify the groom's family of their impending arrival. The cheekiness in the announcement goes as follows; "Is there no one in this compound to receive the bride? Are you not ready to receive the bride?" This sets the tone for the remainder of the procession. The distance covered by the procession up to this point may be 1km, and would have been covered in an hour. The next 100m to the entrance of the house could take thrice as long.

The groom's family which should have been on a waiting alert sends out one of the groom's brothers with the hen to go out and welcome the bride's wedding party. He approaches the bride, brushes the hen against her feet and hands it over to one of the bride's

maternal aunts. This is a sign to show that the bridal party's procession is welcome.

The next few steps can either be agonisingly slow or fun, depending on your point of view. It involves the groom's brothers and sisters constantly giving money to the bridal party as way of persuading them to come into their compound. The party takes a step at a time and taunts the groom's family of either being poor or miserly and therefore not worthy of their beautiful daughter. More money is given them until they finally arrive at the gate (*nchubu*) of the compound. Up until this point, the money offered would have been in change (coins). Once at the gate, the stakes become higher and the bridal train increasingly plays hardball when it comes to entering the gates. They point to untidy surroundings, too many stones, dusty surroundings, or indeed any excuse for staying on the outside of the gates. The groom's family would have to offer them a substantial amount – in notes and not coins in order to gain their acquiescence in entering the gates. The entrance of the bridal party is greeted with joy by both sides. Once within the gates, the bride takes one step at a time, and every step is rewarded by more money – in coins if the groom's family is wise – until the next major milestone point which are the steps leading into the bride's seclusion room. Similar hardball tactics to those played at the gate are in place until the appropriate monetary amount is provided. There is more to follow: monetary bait is needed to coax her to sit on the matted bed in her seclusion room. The bride finally sits on the first mat which is subsequently taken away to the bride's paternal aunt. A new mat is then laid on the bed for her to sit on. Once settled in her room, the groom's brothers and sisters file in to 'buy her mouth'. The bride, having been quiet for the entirety of the procession now opens her mouth to utter a few words and this marks the end of the procession. All but one of the bride's relatives leaves the groom's compound. The one relative who stays there is tasked with babysitting the child who results from the marriage.

Bridal Seclusion

The bridal seclusion period, lasting four days, is a short period of education for the bride to ensure that she is aware of her new roles

and responsibilities. A female member of the groom's family is appointed as the chief custodian of the new wife. She will host the visitors of the new wife and offer them food. She will bathe the bride every morning and rub her with palm oil. During this period, she is not allowed to leave her room.

An interesting symbolic act is performed before the bride is 'released' from the seclusion room on the fourth day. A sumptuous meal of foofoo and soup with plenty of chicken is offered to her. Traditionally, it would take a foolish and extravagant wife to accept this meal. If she does accept it, there will be grumblings by the females to the tune of "our brother has brought a wolf who would rid him of all of his money. Our brother will never be able to build a house on account of having this wolf." It is therefore a wise idea for the newly married wife to politely decline the generous meal and asks for vegetable instead. The declined extravagant meal is subsequently sent to the bride's family as a gesture of goodwill and gratitude for the "good wife." Once the bride finishes her meal, she's bathed and released from bridal seclusion to the rest of the groom's family. Once released, the family engages in the final marriage rites namely the sharing of *sugbwa*, a pastry made from fried corn powder and groundnut paste. It is mixed with cold water in a bowl and given to the bride to drink and pass it on to her newly wedded husband. She is then rubbed with camwood and encouraged to join the rest of the family in a wedding dance called *Ndeb-Ngo-Ndam*. The female relatives of the groom then escort the new wife to her husband's house and the wedding ceremonies are now officially over.

Widowhood in Bali Nyonga

The authors' original intention was to document widowhood rites as a separate paper within this volume. On reflection, however, it became evident that the preamble to both papers is the same. Furthermore, we thought it would be useful to document the contrasting perceptions, emotions and rituals associated with the death of a husband. This part of the paper adopts a similar outline to Part A; namely, outlining the rites associated with different timelines in a widow's life before proceeding to evaluate the durability of these

rituals within a backdrop of some of the external forces that are affecting the unanimous adoption of these rites.

Stages in Widowhood

Widowhood in Bali Nyonga is ritualized like in most of Africa (Potash 1986; Owasanoye and Ahonsi 1997). Whilst there are different sub-groups within Bali Nyonga who exercise different widowhood practices, a common thread of events and practices underlie widowhood in Bali.

1. *Nomination of a supervisor.* When a young bride marries into a new family, she adopts her husband's sisters and aunts as her mentors. Her relationship with these women is always expected to be cordial. More often than not, the in-laws maintain a skeptical view of their brother's wife, often accusing her of estranging him from his family. More often than not, this cynical view is expressed by way of idle gossip and 'expensive' jokes at the expense of the new wife. One of the ladies from this company of in-laws is usually nominated to act as a supervisor in the unfortunate event of a wife becoming a widow.

2. *Seizure of the widow immediately after husband's burial.* Soon after a dead husband is buried, his widow is seized by one of her female in-laws, typically a widow in her own right.

3. *Seclusion of widow from other mourners.* Once the widow is seized, she is taken into a detached room where she spends three days in seclusion. Once in the room, she's stripped partially naked – she may have a loincloth tied above her breast – and made to sit on fresh plantain stems locally known as *chu-nkundong*. Her bed during her period of seclusion is made of fresh plantain leaves placed on the cold bare floor of the room. Every morning, the leaves are inspected – torn leaves signify that she had been unfaithful during their marriage and this is met with sanctions. Whilst in seclusion, she may only eat from a special bowl or on a leaf – she may not share a meal with the other mourners. Her hair, if it were plaited must be undone, roughened or shaved off. Her right hand must always be placed across her left shoulder as a mark of her depression. She is expected to outcry all other sympathizers throughout the mourning period.

4. *Extended period of widowhood observances.* A longer period of widowhood observances lasting between two weeks and twelve months is expected of a widow. During the period of seclusion, the widow receives instructions on how to behave during the extended widowhood period. She is given very strict rules and is advised to follow them religiously. Failure to respect any of these rules, mythology holds, will lead to the insanity of one of the widow's children or close relatives. What is more, failure to abide by one of the stipulated rules may lead to accusations of the widow's culpability for her husband's death. When a widow is sufficiently schooled on the expectations during the extended widowhood period for three days by her supervisor, she is brought out to join the rest of the mourners, who, by this time may only be close relatives of the bereaved. She may now bathe and wear a "sackcloth", a dress made out of either pure black or, more recently white cloth. More often than not, the dress is made by a widow and is typically devoid of style – it is designed to be plain and functional. During the extended widowhood period, the widow must not shake hands with anybody and must go round with a special bamboo chair and a piece of black or white cloth to sit on. Summarily, during the extended widowhood period, the widow must submit herself to conditions that necessarily make her unattractive. Her supervisor keeps a close eye on her and ensures that she abides by these widowhood practices.

5. *Widowhood cleansing rituals.* A cleansing ceremony is scheduled to mark the end of the twelve months of the extended widowhood period. The setting for the ritual is an elephant-grass-stalk and palm fronds arch, built over a cold running stream. Sometime between 4.00am and 5.00am on the appointed cleansing day, the widow is taken down to the cleansing site and made to enter naked into the cold running water. Her supervisor fetches some water from the stream and pours it first over her left shoulder and then on her right shoulder. The supervisor accompanies this ritual with murmuring of phrases to the tune of: *'you have been cleansed of your widowhood – you may now go about your business undisturbed, Let no evil befall you.'* The widow may now bathe herself properly in the stream and is expected to run home naked. The supervisor then dips the widow's sackcloth in a

pool of mud. She will proceed to wash and keep the sackcloth. This marks the end of the rites associated to widowhood.

6. *Post extended widowhood period.* Perhaps the most pertinent question for widows, particularly the young ones is whether they can remarry? In traditional Bali Nyonga, widows were obliged to marry one of their brothers-in-law or alternatively, they could choose any close relative-in-law whom they liked and who was willing to marry them. The matter was usually arranged by discussion soon after the period of extended mourning was over. If there were contesting relatives-in-law, the matter was resolved openly: the contesting in-laws are summoned to the family courtyard and asked to lay out their sleeping mats. The widow would indicate her choice of her new husband by proceeding to sit on the mat belonging to her preferred husband-to-be. If a widow chose to marry outside her deceased husband's family, she would immediately forfeit any stake to her husband's estate. Her new husband would be bound to refund the bride price and value of goods that were spent on the widow by her previous husband's family. If this were not done, any children born by her in her new husband would belong to her deceased husband's family.

A postscript on marriage and widowhood rites in Bali Nyonga

The five stages of marriage described in this paper represent a traditional view of marriage as collated by the authors from a variety of interviews with different married men and women who had experienced the Bali Nyonga marriage rites. It is also influenced by one of the author's personal recollections of the rites that he went through as well as those experienced in the marriage of his three daughters to families of different Bali-Nyonga families. By the same token, the widowhood practices described in the previous section is largely collated from interviews with several widows who have partaken in some of these practices. The final part of this section provides some generic, possibly controversial questions and observations about the traditional rites associated with marriage and widowhood in Bali Nyonga. The aim of this section is to stimulate further research into individual aspects of these rites and practices:

their origins, rationales, aims and objectives and applicability to modern day Cameroon.

Question 1 – Are the traditional marriage and widowhood rites detailed in this paper adhered to in every marriage?

The answer to this question is a resounding “No”. The Bali Nyonga cultural purists will frown at this answer, but there are several contributing factors that make adherence to all the marriage and widowhood rites an unrealistic aim. As intimated in the Introduction of this chapter, the Bali Nyonga marriage and widowhood rites are most likely a hotchpotch of rites inherited from the different ethnic groups that make up the Bali Nyonga kingdom.

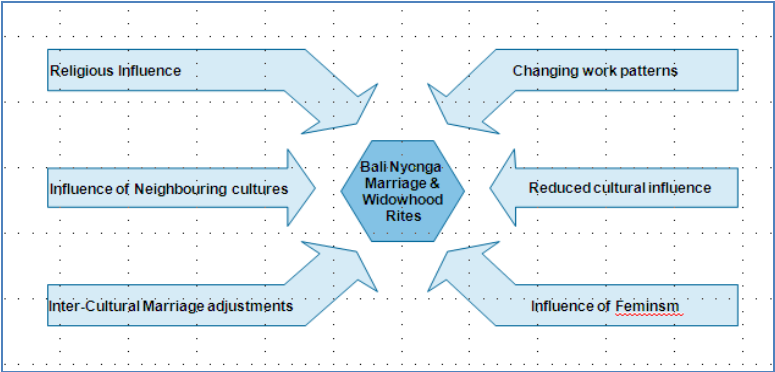


Figure 4: Factors influencing (lack of) adherence to Bali Nyonga Traditional Marriage Rites

Figure 1 above shows some of the factors that affect the strict adherence to the marriage and widowhood rites described in this paper. Each of the factors represented in the diagram are worthy subjects of further research. Some of the specific research questions that could be investigated are considered in the Table below.

Religious influence	The people of Bali Nyonga throughout their migration have had the influence of different denominational religions. Arguably, the first non-indigenous religion is Islam, gained from their travels to their current
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	destination. Once in their current base, the Bali Nyonga people formed a close alliance with the German missionaries who set up the Basel mission in Bali Nyonga early in the twentieth century. Following this, there has been a proliferation of Christian churches in Bali and the surrounding Bamenda region. More and more Bali Nyonga indigenes have subscribed to these religions and the rites, rituals and practices, some of which may not be compatible with some of the rites discussed in this paper.
Neighbouring cultures	As noted in earlier sections, marriage and widowhood rites in Bali Nyonga are most likely a mix of rituals gained during the peoples' nomadic movement to their current location. Most of its neighbours are of the <i>widikum</i> origin who have different marriage rites to those of the <i>Chamba</i>. The past few decades have been a period of <i>relative</i> peace between Bali Nyonga and its neighbours which has allowed for transfer cultural values, particularly through intermarriage.
Changing work patterns	The marriage and widowhood rituals described in this article are necessarily time-consuming. There is an increasing migratory trend of working from the rural Bali-Nyonga area to the Bamenda urban area and further away in other urban areas in Cameroon. The people working away from Bali Nyonga typically cannot afford the time needed to partake in all marriage and widowhood rituals. To accommodate for this, it is not uncommon for marriage rites to either cramp all of the rituals in one or two weekends or, alternatively, short-circuit the rituals to make them more amenable with their work

	patterns.
Inter-cultural marriage adjustments	Bali-Nyonga is one of five first-class chiefdoms in the North West Province. All of these chiefdoms, as well as some of the second and third class chiefdoms have different marriage and widowhood rites and practices. A compromise of rituals needs to be struck when there is a marriage between persons of these chiefdoms and a Bali-Nyonga indigene. This results in a relaxation of the marriage rites.
Reduced cultural influence	It is a truism that cultural institutions in Bali Nyonga are less binding to its indigenes. In the modern day, people have more flexibility to pick and choose between aspects of traditions that they wish to subscribe to, safe in the knowledge that repercussions are either inconsequential (can be paid for financially) or non-existent.
Influence of Feminism	There is an increasing feminist movement in Africa in general who speak out for and fight against practices that are considered either derogatory or unfair to the womenfolk. There are several Bali women's groups such as Nkumu Fed Fed comprising of western-educated women who challenge certain cultural practices, sensitize women in Bali and effect piecemeal changes in traditional practices such as marriage and widowhood.

It would be worthwhile to research into the impact that these six forces have had on marriage rites in Bali Nyonga as well as investigate the adaptability of the rites in the light of increase influences from these factors.

Question 2 – What is the impact of globalization on the rites of marriage and widowhood in Bali Nyonga?

It should be evident to the reader that local cultures and practices have been instrumental in shaping and adapting marriage rites in Bali Nyonga. There is a more powerful force, referred to in literature as globalization which will certainly have an impact on traditional societies. In fact, there is an anthropological trend of globalization subsuming traditional societies and resulting in a more ubiquitous culture. Further research can gain a better understanding of these cultural practices with a view to positioning them within the ubiquitous practices.

Observation – Durability of the Traditional Marriage

The authors observe (albeit empirically) that a lot of traditional marriages of over the past eight decades seem to have stood the test of time; this against a backdrop of high divorce rates in the West. It is worth investigating whether this perceived durability is due to some of the marriage rites.

Observation – Other marriage rites in Bali Sub Division

As discussed in the introductory section, there are several ethnic groups within Bali sub division. More research should be carried out in traditional forms of marriages amongst the people of Bawock and Bossa as well as the Mbororo people resident in Bali.

Observation – Administration of widowhood practices.

The authors observe with some interest the fact that widowhood practices are in general, largely implemented by women with minimal influence from any men. This is remarkable in a culture which, in the round promotes male domination. There is scope for interesting research on the origins of these practices and why the adherence rates (particularly of the rites immediately post death) are still very high.

Finally, the authors suggest that more researchers document the different rites, around birth, manhood, death etc for posterity.

Conclusion

The expressed aim of this paper was to investigate the rites and rituals that take place during a traditional marriage and widowhood. We catalogue these practices in five different stages and proceeded to ask some questions with a view to stimulating further research into these marriage and widowhood rites in Bali Nyonga. We have posed some specific research questions which we sincerely hope students and researchers can address.

Chapter Five

Imagining Bali Nyonga Online: Online discussions of the Bali-Bawock Crisis on a Bali Electronic Forum

Lilian Ndangam Fokwang

Along with capital, ideologies, technologies, and media images, an increasingly prominent feature of globalization is the transnational movement of people (both free and forced). To meet various information needs, diasporic communities have besides interpersonal communication with relatives and friends in the homeland, operated small newspapers, magazines and broadcast media. However, with increased access to networked computers among migrant communities, the establishment and sustenance of virtual communities and other on-line social networks has become a feature of settlement and integration experiences within many migrant communities. These virtual communities thrive on the ability of computer mediated communication to transcend the limitations of time and space. Virtual communities can both be rooted in and sustained by a pre-existing physical community, could serve as an initiator of such a place based community (Hiller and Franz, 2004) or could simply be initiated and sustained in cyberspace based on shared interests. Appaduria (1996) suggests that the media provide resources for self-imagining as an “everyday social project” (Appadurai, 1996 p. 4, cited in Chan, 2005). Indeed, several scholars have pointed to the role of electronic discussion groups and listserves in creating and sustaining virtual national communities within the African diaspora in cyberspace (Bastian, 1999; Kadende-Kaiser (2000) Bernal, 2006; Tynes, 2007 and Anyefru, 2008). These electronic fora concurrently serve as a source of information as members circulate news considered to be of interest to subscribers (e.g. news developments from home, immigration updates). Electronic discussion groups by African nationals that discuss issues relevant to their country of origin and their migration experiences, amongst others also serve as a venue for virtual interaction, collective imagining and mobilizing

social action. Listservs, and electronic discussions groups such as *Naijanet* (Nigerians) *Nijapolitics* (Nigerians) *Camnetwork* (Cameroonians), *AfricaPolitics* (Africans in General) and various interactive websites provide a means of engaging with fellow compatriots living in the same country or elsewhere.

Whereas some researchers have suggested that such a reconfiguration of existing community life in cyberspace potentially moves beyond ethnic, class and spatial differences (Bastian 1999), in the case of online groups formed along ethnic lines, ethno-cultural identity (i.e. an identity rooted in a particular place of origin and shared ancestry) is a primary determinant of membership. That membership and interactions frequently thrives on and is sustained by a shared identity tied to the territorial homeland illustrates that far from dissipating with modernity as Paul (2000) suggests, ethnicity can be a catalyst for mobilization and solidarity (Paul 2000, cited in Tetey and Puplammplu (2005): 160). In discussing how new technologies could potentially serve as a framework for both strengthening existing ethnic communities and creating virtual ethnic communities, Elkins (1997) suggests that new technologies such as satellite and the internet allow ethnic communities to find ways to support their diaspora and retain their language and culture. Consequently, the Internet can become a “place” where networked users electronically reconstitute relationships that existed before migration (Karim 1998). The identity that emerges from these cybercommunities is ‘a hybrid of: past alliances, the re-establishment of relations through the newsgroups, as well as the experiences of negotiating real life in the new country of settlement and interaction with other individuals/groups in that society’ (Karim 1998: 13). In the case of Cameroon, both Eko (2003) and more recently Anyefru (2008) have illustrated how electronic discussion forums serve as catalysts for the development of an ‘Anglophone identity’ among English speaking Cameroonians in the diaspora. Agreeing with Karim and Bastian that the development of a community of interest of migrants in cyberspace, is based on prior socio-cultural relationships which existed before leaving home, it is worth noting that the cyberspace community is only part of developing and maintaining these relationships. Migrants equally depend on structures of associational

life developed offline. Within the Bali Nyonga community, membership to a *Ndabkum* (communal gathering) or a related cultural entity grouping fellow Balis are equally important to the migrant experience. Evidence can be found in the growing membership of associations such as the Bali Cultural Association (BCA) in the United States, Germany, Canada and the Scandinavian countries, the Bali Cultural and Development Association (UK). Virtual online networks are only one of many ways through which diasporic communities interact with each other as part of associational life.

Mbonbani@yahoogroups.com

In this chapter, I broadly draw on evidence from years of reading and collecting texts from mbonbani@yahoogroups.com and specifically on discussions on the group in March 2007 when a crisis emerged between Bali Nyonga and Bawock. As a subscriber and participant observer of the Mbonbani egroups for over a decade, I am familiar with the discussions and evolution of the egroup. Whilst I have met and talked with subscribers to the forum who live in Cameroon, USA, Germany, UK and Canada, this chapter draws on methods of textual and discourse analysis to examine discussions on the forum in March 2007 during the Bali-Bawock crisis as a case study of how participants imagined and constructed their homeland in a time of perceived threat to its territorial space. The crisis provoked vibrant debate on the forum as participants sought to understand the roots of the crisis and to defend Bali Nyonga from perceived attack by asserting both Bali Nyonga authority and pacifism. The terms ‘imagine’ and ‘imagining’ in this chapter are informed by Mitra’s (1997) application of both ‘imaging’ and ‘imagination’ to ‘indicate the ways in which a community, albeit electronic, can textually produce itself, thus imagine itself – as well as present itself to the outside world, and thus produce an image’ (p. 55). Through an analysis of the discussions of the crisis on the forum, I document the ways in which members of the forum (most of whom are based in the international diaspora) imagined Bali and thus produced particular images of Bali identity to an audience that was both virtual and non-virtual, and composed of Bali people, non-Balis and those deemed to be anti-Bali. I argue that the discussions of the

crisis on the forum reflected several themes that simultaneously served to imagine Bali Nyonga in particular ways. The online discussions also provided an opportunity for members of the forum to respond to dominant images of Bali Nyonga as subscribers used the liminal space (Chan 2005) offered by the internet to challenge and resist criticisms of the homeland while at the same asserting an imaginarity of Bali Nyonga superiority and status. Examining both email subjects and content sourced these out.

Mbonbani was created in August 6th 1999 by Frida Domatob who remains owner of the group. Her husband Ben Fokum assumed moderation of the group on September 1 2001 and has since remained its sole moderator. Although the forum generally functions as an open space for discussions, the moderator of the group maintains a very visible and authoritative position frequently monitoring, controlling or halting discussions on some topics deemed sensitive or inappropriate²¹. The group's homepage defines the group as: "Bali in West Central Africa" – a description aimed at distinguishing the group from the city of Bali in Indonesia. The discussion group is composed largely of Bali Nyonga citizens from the North West Region of Cameroon. Although membership is also open to non-Balis with emotional or other ties to Bali, a cultural affinity to Bali Nyonga serves as, and remains a significant point of reference for most subscribers. Majority of the subscribers to the Mbonbani egroup are based outside Cameroon. Subscribers in North

²¹Email list owners and moderators generally have significant control over who subscribes and contributes to their group. In the case of Mbonbani, prior to March 2007, anyone could subscribe and participate in the group. The egroup had no official subscription policy. However, during the Bali-Bawock crisis some members of the Bawock diaspora subscribed to the forum, and sent incendiary mails which harshly condemned the Balis for their actions. The incident prompted the moderator to institute a subscription policy as a means of curbing anonymous postings. The policy required at least two existing members of the group to support the subscription request of a prospective subscriber. Besides controlling subscriptions, the moderator of the group maintains a very hands position in the forum. For instance, on several occasions the moderator has issued public warnings to subscribers whose content was deemed offensive or inappropriate. Other subscribers have been reprimanded for responding to discussions regarding a particular topic the moderator has halted discussions thereof or for insulting fellow subscribers. Repeat offenders have been banned from the group by the moderator.

America, Europe, and Asia comprise the dominant number of posters to the forum. With increased access to the internet and email making it easier for communication, subscribers to Mbonbani who are based in Cameroon have steadily increased in the last few years. As a result, interaction on Mbonbani is also sometimes initiated by subscribers at home. Membership to the forum implicitly acknowledges subscribers' perceived identity and obligation in relation both to their homeland and their host country. Hiller and Franz (2004) suggests that "it is not only past memories and old ties that produce a sense of belonging and rootedness in a territorial homeland, but also how new ties can be discovered and nurtured because of a common identity that is based on a former place of residence" (Hiller and Franz, 2004: 733). Despite its high number of postings and the diversity of topics discussed, the bulk of the group's subscribers (often referred to as the silent majority) are readers who rarely respond to emails and discussions on the group. Another subgroup of subscribers can be classified as occasional posters. English is the dominant language of expression used by subscribers to the group²². Postings on the group are archived and readily accessible to subscribers through the Yahoogroups site.

The community created online through Mbonbani and similar virtual communities has facilitated communication between the homeland and the diaspora in ways not possible prior to the rise of the networked computer. Besides regular information sharing and discussions between subscribers, the forum has been used to circulate messages from the Fon's palace to the wider Bali community in the diaspora. For instance, in 2005, following intense debate on the forum about the cancellation of the annual Lela festival, the following email was dispatched to the forum by the Fon's palace:

"My Dear Children,

²² This reflects the dominance of the English language online as well as the insufficient mastery of written Mungaka amongst majority of the subscribers to the forum. Occasionally, some posters include Mungaka sentences or whole paragraphs in Mungaka. For more on language use on the forum, please see Fielding's chapter in this book.

In regards to the above subject which is being discussed on this forum at length, Ba Doh Ganyonga hears and understands all that have been said. Effective immediately, I urge all of you to channel all your concerns and suggestions about matters of Kingdom to your local leaders (Council of Elders, Tadmanjis, Sama, Nkoms) who will then forward it to the Traditional Council in Bali for discussion.

This is the traditional and appropriate way to handle our issues.

Thank you.

Office of the Fon of Bali.”

Posted on Mbonbani@yahoogroups on Tuesday November 1 2005.

Similarly, in 2009, a letter issued by the Fon to all Bali Nyonga indigenes regarding obligations to contribute to the development of the homeland was circulated on the forum by one of his Nkoms²³ and widely debated on the forum. In both instances, the forum provided a means for the traditional ruler to instantly communicate with a sizeable number of Bali people in the diaspora.

Postings on Mbonbani are frequently informational (e.g. announcements of Bali related activities in the diaspora, achievements of Bali people, and events in Bali). Postings also circulate general news considered to be of interest to subscribers (current affairs, global politics, news about Cameroon, health etc.) Membership to the forum allows subscribers to connect with Bali and with each other virtually and fraternally through discussions that range from cultural practices in Bali and social hierarchies, to development projects in Bali and current events around the world. Postings and discussions on the forum range from the light-hearted (e.g. jokes, quizzes and teasers) which create warmth and humour in the group to the serious (e.g. politics, customary practices, traditional institutions and language) which generate lots of discussions. Discussions on aspects of Mungaka (the language of Bali Nyonga) feature frequently on the forum. Debate on the forum has simultaneously afforded subscribers a space to scrutinise, question

²³ Nkom is the traditional title given to the Fon's minister.

and challenge cultural practices, rites, traditional titles and institutions in ways not possible otherwise. Topical and often heated discussions on Mbonbani have included the place and role of the *Voma* cult in an increasingly urbanized Bali, the organization of the *Lela*, succession rites and titles, rituals, and the role of the Fon. As the above letter from the Fon indicates, the virtual forum is not deemed to be the appropriate venue to discuss concerns that Bali Nyonga citizens might have with traditional religious and political institutions. At the same time many subscribers have found these discussions useful in enabling them learn more and understand Bali culture and society. This use of the Internet as a transnational public sphere to produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity (Bernal, 2006) is one of the reasons why scholars argue that new media particularly the internet have transformed how diasporic communities relate with their “homelands” Kaldor-Robinson (2002). (See also Fung (2002) Bernal (2006) Anyefru (2008) and Tynes (2007)). Certainly, the virtual communities that are forged through online discussion groups of this nature are proof that “homelands are no longer just a memory supported by occasional contact, but can be an intimate aspect of daily living due to the choices that are available in participating in virtual communities in cyberspace” (Hiller and Franz, 2004: 735).

Brief History of the Bali and Bawock

Bali Nyonga was founded by Nyongpasi (later Fonyonga I) who led the group to its present site and reigned for 27 years thereafter (Nyamndi 2007). The Bali Nyonga people are part of a larger Chamba ethnic group which migrated to the Cameroon Grassfields from Chamba in the northern Nigeria-Cameroon border sometime in the late 18th century. The Chamba migration southwards took place over several decades and entailed fighting several wars with groups it encountered along the way. See Nyamndi (2007) and the introduction to this book for details. Owing to this migratory history, Nyamndi rightfully concludes that the origin of Bali is tied to its history as part of ‘a roving army state where military expediency commanded unflinching loyalty to the soldier-king’ (Nyamndi, 2007: 22).

Descendants of Fonyonga have ruled Bali Nyonga since the group's settlement in the Grassfields.

The Bawock are originally from the Western province of Cameroon - a region whose inhabitants are dominantly from the Bamileke ethnic group. The Bawock settled in the south east of Bali Nyonga after fleeing from hostilities of the Bagante at the turn of the 20th century. However as Chilver (1964) notes, the first Bamileke migrants to join the Bali Nyongas at their present site were the Batis, whom the Balis first encountered in 1835. The Batis joined Bali Nyonga in 1904 and stayed till 1911 when they decided to return to the Western Province and settled at their present day location in the Noun Valley in the Western Province²⁴. Soon after the arrival of the Batis in Bali Nyonga, a smaller contingent of Bawock followed the Batis (sometime between 1906-1907). The group led by Nana Ntukam, had fled the hostilities of the chief of Bagante²⁵. The decision of the Bawock to settle around Bali was probably influenced by the kinship ties between Nana Ntukam and the Bati chief who was married to his sister. According to Chilver (1964), Nana's decision to interpose himself between the Bati chief and Fonyonga II led to a deterioration of his relationship with his brother-in-law. Chilver also notes that in 1911, when the Batis left Bali Nyonga and returned to the Western Province, they took along the ruler of Bawock (Nana) as hostage. However, most of the Bawock people remained in Bali. In 1912, with the help of the Basel Mission, Nana escaped and rejoined the Bawock people in Bali²⁶ and Fonyonga II settled them in the area vacated by the Batis.

²⁴ Between 1904 and 1911, Fonyonga II who ruled Bali Nyonga welcomed new settlers from different ethnic groups and allowed them to settle within his area of influence (Chilver, 1964). Some groups came voluntarily whilst others were resettled in Bali by Germans after what Chilver (1964) describes as "German punitive expeditions."

²⁵ The decision of the Bawock to settle around Bali was probably influenced by the kinship ties between Nana Ntukam and the Bati chief as the latter was married to Nana's sister.

²⁶ Chilver, 1964.

Background to the Crisis of 2007

For much of the 20th century, the Balis and the Bawock coexisted peacefully²⁷ albeit with occasional contestations regarding authority and the performance of traditional rituals. For instance, a 1982 government order categorized the Bawock Chiefdom as a 2nd Class Chiefdom and Bali Nyonga as a 1st Class Chiefdom – a decision interpreted by some as a recognition that the Chief of Bawock was to pay allegiance to the Fon of Bali²⁸. The location of the Bali Nyonga ancestral shrine of “Ntsi Sufu” near Bawock has been a source of tension between the Balis and the Bawock²⁹. One of the remote causes of the crisis which erupted in March 2007 can be traced to a November 2006 letter submitted to Mezam Divisional administrative authorities by the chiefs of Bawock, Pinyin and Mbuh (both of Santa Subdivision) respectively requesting an amicable demarcation of boundaries between their respective villages. Bawock is surrounded by Bali villages such as Mbelu, Mantum, Mundum, Koppin and Kopella in a contiguous fashion – an issue which the Fon of Bali brought to the attention of the administrative officers³⁰. Both media reports and published documentation trace the immediate cause of the crisis to the interruption of the Bali Voma cult ritual and the subsequent confiscation of elements of the Voma cult by some

²⁷ The peaceful coexistence of both entities was acknowledged in several postings on forum during the crisis. For instance, a posting on March 9 indicated: ‘There is no clear cut boundary between Bawock and Bali. Bawock is an integral part of Bali because among the Bawock population, you find Bali people from Ba Tita Foncham, Ba Tita Todmia, Ba Tah Ntungwen, Ba Francis Yuhmbosi and others who have lived side by side their Bawock brothers and sister for decades in peace and harmony.’”

²⁸ In the Cameroon grassfields the Fon is a chief or king of an entity or ethnic group. The Fon is the ‘pivotal administrative, judicial and religious figure in the Fondom’ (Nyamndi, 2007: 21)

²⁹ According to the Enquirer newspaper, frequent skirmishes between the two and petitions by the Bawock led to a temporary injunction order suspending activities at the shrine in 1975 and 1986 respectively.

³⁰ The Bali Traditional Council (2007) subsequently described the Bawock’s proposed amicable land demarcation as equivalent to Gambia seeking a land demarcation between itself and Mali and Mauritania and ignoring the fact the Gambia was surrounded by Senegal.

Bawock people during an outing of the Voma. The Voma fraternity along with the Lela cult are two powerful traditional religious institutions within Bali Nyonga³¹. Nyamdi notes that:

“The original function of Voma was to cleanse from blood-guilt and to protect and enhance agricultural fertility through guinea-corn. But with time the Voma priests assumed the primary responsibility in the mortuary rites and accession rituals of the Fon of Bali” (Nyamdi, 2007: 97).

Voma priests, (composed of 9 highly distinguished men) perform an annual ritual to bless the land prior to the farming and planting season which proceed following the rains in mid-March. It is a sacred ritual and components used for the ritual are considered sacrosanct by the Bali people. The Voma priests perform the rituals in Mantum (a Bali Nyonga village) which borders Bawock³². According to the Bali Traditional Council, the seizure, confiscation and subsequent destruction of sacred elements of the Voma cult was deemed as “overt provocation and hostility” towards the Balis by the Bawocks (Bali Traditional Council 2007). However, a Bawock source cited in *The Post* newspaper stated that on March 3 the Bali Voma priests on their way to the ritual site, had stopped by and entered the Bawock palace without authorisation and in the absence of the traditional ruler. Attempts by some Bawock people to stop the Voma priests from entering the Bawock palace had resulted in a scuffle between the two groups. Angered by this, some Bali youths decided to attack the Bawocks. According to the *Post* newspaper, “*An estimated crowd of about 500 youths from Bali Nyongha in Bali Subdivision of the Northwest Province on Saturday, March 3, invaded Bawock, a neighbouring village and burnt down over 50 houses.*” (*The Post*, March 5 2007). The paper’s account was subsequently disputed by the Bali Traditional Council in a later publication in which it noted that after the seizure of the Voma elements, some members of the Bali public arrived Bawock

³¹ Nyamdi (2007) notes that whilst the Lela cult travelled with Bali Nyonga after the split, the Voma was introduced to Bali Nyonga from Bali Gham by Tita Ngo during the reign of Fonyonga I. Nyamdi speculates that in the after math of the split, none of the Voma initiates had travelled with the Bali Nyonga.

³² Other Bali villages which border Bawock include, Mbu, Mbeluh, Kombela and Mundum.

‘first out of curiosity and then out of self-defence to retrieve their “VOMA” [original emphasis] from the assailants!’³³. Within days of the attack on the Bawock, a section of the Bali Nyonga palace housing various traditional symbols was set on fire – an act which some in Bali viewed as retaliation by some people in Bawock. According to the International Red Cross, ‘the unrest resulted in the displacement of about 2,309 people, representing almost the entire Bawock community which is a minority in the region’ (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2007). These were the circumstances under which the discussions emerged on Mbonbani yahoo groups in March. Prior to the crisis, the failure of a water project in Bali had been the subject of intense discussions on the forum. Postings and subsequent message threads on the group regarding the Bali-Bawock crisis were analysed from March 5 – to March 31st and emergent themes identified.

News and Information

The crisis was first brought to the attention of the group by way of a request for information and clarification on what was happening between Bali and Bawock.

Would any knowledgeable person in this forum update us on what's going on between Bali and Bawock? I was taken aback in church yesterday when an individual asked for prayers for her family because people from Bali recently stormed Bawock, burned down the Palace and destroyed houses. She proceeded to telling me after the service that her parents are now hiding [sic] farms because they cannot risk going through Bali to take a taxi to Bamenda or elsewhere.

BP

The mail initiated a thread of discussion as subscribers sought to both provide further information and request more information. For example, a subscriber forwarded a news story from The Post newspaper headlined “Bali Warriors Burn Fon's Palace”.

Other responses reflected the close ties between some Bali and Bawock people and how the unfolding crisis personally affected some subscribers.

³³ (Bali Traditional Council 2007)

I read your email with horror and have been trying to call Cameroon to no avail. I called a fellow Bawock brother who confirmed the information. He confirmed that the Fon's palace is completely burned down. It is alleged that about 30 Bawock family homes have been burned down. I hope if true, this is exaggerated otherwise where do all these poor families go? He however confirmed that he was told that some especially, women have taken cover in farmlands...just horrific!

We have to strongly condemn this, if true before it deteriorates into massacre. Cameroon has it's ills but we have been able to live amongst each other in harmony.

Due to geography I happen to be from a part of Bali where apart from labeling, I am very comfortable being called a Bawock person. That's how close knit that society has or used to be.

Bawock people have assisted in burying many a dead in our compound, like families do and vice versa.

I hope the proper authority has strongly taken control and is investigating. If I get any first hand information, I will let you know.

PS

And several hours after their posting earlier in the day calling for a strong condemnation of the destruction of property and displacement of people in Bawock, PS wrote with some additional information:

Based on info we got from home today, it is alleged that a Bali "Voma" juju group was en route to a compound(Tita Foncham's neighbourhood) [sic] in Bali for their annual traditional round and while traversing through Bawock, they were stopped by some Bawock citizens and their "Voma" attire stripped and taken from them. They ran back and reported in Bali whereupon the people in Bali got enraged, ran back to Bawock and then burned the Fon's palace down, which happened to be empty at the time. It is said that the Fon has not been constant at the palace since their last dispute with Bali and has been out of the village for sometime. Some Bawock families have been seen packing out of Bali, though still going through Ntanfoang to get transportation. This must mean they are comfortable enough to pass through Bali and I assume they must not be in hiding as we heard before. We were told that the houses burned down were only those belonging to the men that had interfered with the "Voma" guys.

PS

The following day, an email with the subject line *B.Ali Nyonga Palace Partly ablazed* [sic] poster ET a Cameroon based subscriber wrote:

All Bali Nyonga elite are hereby informed that at 4 Am this morning Cameroon time, the gate house of the Bali Nyonga's Palace and some few houses at Mantum have been set on fire by the Bawock people. At this time that I'm writing Bali is in total commotion. The war is at our door step.

ET

Although these messages were mainly informational they simultaneously reflected the quest for a fact-based understanding of the unfolding crisis and prompted further probing from subscribers. For instance:

Are there any human casualties at this time? What are the police and gendarmes doing to quell down this commotion before it gets completely out of control? Can you please attach some images as they speak a thousand words.

SD

Reading all the public reactions and analysis of the crisis between Bali and Bawock one finds it very difficult to get a clear answer or a vivid representation of who is the victim in the whole crisis. There is a lot of inconsistency on how individuals view the conflict. It would be of interest to first of all try to answer some pertinent questions surrounding the happenings before and after all what happened, then we can have an insight of the picture.

1.) *How on earth could a whole village be burnt down and no one gets injured?*

2.) *Before burning the Bawock village, did the same Bali people help escort the Bawock people to the Governor's office which is Up-Station to ensure there is no casualty?*

3.) *How could the SDO for Mezam take a team of Lands-and survey as well as his own gendarmes to Bali for boundry demarcation without the knowledge of his counterpart in Bali or the Fon of Bali or the Mayor?*

4.) *How could the vehicle of the Gerndarme boss be vanderlized and no noise made about it or the media talking about it?*

5.) *When we talk of sovereignty what is it all about? People not knowing when they are having a government official visit their land?*

CT

Several subscribers expressed concern about the escalating violence and called for peace between the two communities. For instance, after several emails from subscribers criticising Bawock and its leader, BP wrote urging members of the forum not pass judgement or condone acts of violence before ascertaining the complete picture of events adding that ‘our first goal should be to strongly call for cessation of violence and for level headed persons from each side to work on resolving any disputes’.

Defending the homeland: Asserting Bali Nyonga authority

Given the composition of the forum, majority of the postings concerning the crisis on the forum were from subscribers condemning the actions of the Bawock and supporting/defending Bali Nyonga. A significant majority of posters to the forum were however critical of the Bawock and called for some form of retaliation. It was often the response to these mails that posters’ understandings and relations to the homeland became evident. For instance:

The Bali people wouldn't lunch such an attack without real provocation, It's regretatble [sic] that the Bawock chief has finally led his people to tragedy. From this incidence, the Bawock people will hardly ever enjoy the hospitable treatment Bali has given to them so far. Thank God our people are civilizxed and reasonable now. If this was some years back, the report could have included dozens of deaths, not just loss of property.
DG

Why did our people not allowed [sic] those who attacked the voma to confront the nraths of this secret and dreaded cult?

SL

A recurrent theme which emerged in emails, was the image of Bali hospitality and a warrior nation. Expressed clearly in emails or implied through particular constructions of the Bawock as not belonging, postings constructed Bali Nyonga as a peaceful host to an ungrateful and recalcitrant Bawock settler community determined to ascertain autonomy within Bali. For instance:

The Bawock people should understand that the land they are living on belongst and will always belong to Bali and no matter what kind of tricks or falsehoods will change this fact.

FT

I want us to visualize Bali-Nyonga as a miniature United States of America. Bali Nyonga is an agglomeration of indigenous tribes where in the Tikali's, the Bati's, the Basangam, etc can be distinguish. I look at the Bawock's as a latecomer who was treated with a red carpet. Whereas the other arriving tribes were authorized to relinquish their arriving lingual franca and pay allegiance to His Majesty the Fon of Bali, the Bawock's enjoyed the luxury of a distinct language with Morales and folksways dissimilar to the umbrella values of Bali Nyonga. That was mistake number one.

GM

The Bali people have always extended their "olive branches" to the needy and it seems of late that these kind gestures are being taken for granted as demonstrated by the Bawock chief. Where were the Bawock people when Bali fought wars with the Bafochus (Mbuh) and Pinyin that they now claim to have boundaries with? Let them go learn the history before letting themselves be manipulated by the Pinyin and Santa people for their political gains. The Bali people from northern Nigeria during the Usman Damfodio war fought their way though their present location. And being warriors, an act of provocation is a declaration of war.

CB

Evident in most emails with a thematic focus on defending/supporting Bali was the othering of Bawock people – an “us” versus “them” approach to the crisis which frequently drew on the history of the two communities to characterise the Bawock as ungrateful strangers who had trespassed on the hospitality of their landlord and host. For instance, DG’s posting implicitly recognized Bali Nyonga’s history as a warrior group: “*If this was some years back, the report could have included dozens of deaths, not just loss of property*”. At the same time, the poster’s characterisation of ‘our people’ as ‘civilized and reasonable’ implicitly works to categorize the Bawock Other as uncivilized and unreasonable. A subsequent poster employed existing stereotypes of the Bamileke ethnic group to cast the Bawocks as “strangers” and “settlers”.

Bawock people I am sorry to say, have always considered themselves as quests [sic] in Bali by the way they lived. I don't know about recently, but when I was growing up, you could hardly find any decent construction in Bawock in terms of housing or schools. They originate from Bangante and we all know how business oriented the Bamilikes are. How many businesses do we have in Bawock such as large convenient stores for example, like you would find in the streets of Mbounda and the like? How many Bawock sons and daughters here in the US are part of BCA USA or any development initiative for Bali? What really have the Bali people gained from their hospitality to the Bawock people? But I can point out to you what we have lost and it may be a lesson that is coming too late because they are here now and we can't do anything about them. But they MUST LIVE BALI PEOPLE ALONE! [original emphasis] They live in Bali with the same mentality like the Ibos live in Cameroon-transient. Not building or investing in anything long term in case they might have to leave. It is not uncommon to have someone stop a taxi in the middle of Bali and announce in perfect French, "Je vais a Bawock". Not that there is anything wrong with that. But when I experienced that a few years ago while visiting Bali, it was a sudden realization that indeed we do have "strangers" here.

LF

The postings by DG and LF illustrate the process of “othering” at work. In imagining a Bali hospitality to which the Bawock are considered to have trespassed, several forum participants constructed the Bawock people as strangers and settlers. This construction of Bali is ironic given its history as a migrant group which settled in the Bamenda Grassfields following years of internecine wars. Nyamnjoh (2005) rightly argued that the myriad processes of globalisation have ushered in insecurities and anxieties within individuals and communities leading to an ‘obsession with citizenship, belonging, and the building or re-actualisation of boundaries and differences through xenophobia and related intolerances’ in several parts of Africa (p.18). This has rendered identity politics essential to the political process in Africa. The construction of the Bawocks on Mbonbani network during discussions of the crisis certainly illustrates Nyamnjoh’s point.

Despite the image of a hospitable and peaceful neighbour constructed by the above emails, some posters questioned this

particular imagining of the Bali. For instance, in broadly agreeing with LF's mail cited above, poster KL wrote:

But I am also afraid that maybe the Bawock people did not construct convenient stores because they felt they were living among wolves. Do they have convenient stores in other "strange" lands they are living today? ... I lived there and observed these people all my life until I went to CPC. This last lela celebration they all fled their homes as we approached nchi sufu. I have never seen them being invited to take part in the major Bali celebrations. Have we ever seen them organize a "loti parade" during lela festivals? Maybe they have but I remember seeing Batibo, Meta, Nchomba etc. True their chief used to drink at Turukang and sit on the rostrum during some occasions in the palace but where were his people? You see sometime I seem to see that we treated this Bawock people the way America is treating Africa, the way Francophones treat anglophones or the NW/SW divide. The majority always seem to lord it over the minority. I REALLY DON'T WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN!!!!
[original emphasis]

KL

Another subscriber later wrote to the forum:

I still do not know where the Bali people got their notion of villages being under them! This is a statement often and readily heard from even the most educated Bali forks! [sic] The only explanation that I can think of is genetics (chronic egotism) that may have sip from the genes of your warrior fathers to you. What an awful gene for a generation to obtain from their ancestors.

AM

Poster AM turned out to be a Bawock indigene who subscribed to the group within days of the beginning of the crisis. His postings frequently challenged those who supported the actions of Bali. He was subsequently unsubscribed and banned from the group by the moderator who deemed his postings to be insulting to the Bali people and their leader. Resistance to the instinctive defence of Bali Nyonga by most posters to the forum and the concurrent resistance to the construction of Bali as pacifist hosts to a subordinate "Other" illustrate that the existence of such a virtual community dominated by members of one ethnic group does not guarantee cohesion in discourse. However, as one can see from the postings of KL and AM, discussions of the crisis provided an opportunity to articulate resistance against dominant and sometimes official constructions of

Bali as pacifist hosts to an “uncivilized” and “unreasonable” Bawock. Interestingly, the resistance to this dominant construction equally drew on the historical circumstances surrounding the origins Bali Nyonga and its evolution as a group that fought several wars in the course of its migration and settlement in the Grassfields.

Bali Warriors

Several newspaper article reports of the crisis characterised the Bali people as warriors. For instance, in an article headlined on March 5th read: “Bali Warriors Burn Fon's Palace, 50 Other Houses”, the article described the Balis as invaders and warriors. Whilst such reporting was deemed by some members as a stereotypical and unfair representation of Bali Nyonga, the image of the Balis as warriors featured prominently in several postings from subscribers to Mbonbani. For instance:

If this is not provoking genocide against their very people, how on earth can the Bawock (Young) chief, or rather the quarter head of Bawock quarter in Bali Nyonga and/or people believe that they can stand the wrath of the Bali Nyonga's aggressivity.[sic]

GK

We are surrounded by those that seek our demise, why not have revolutionary Army to revive and educated our neighbors as to where our boundaries start and end. It is a moral issue for us to defend our land at all cost. Just thinking.

SF,

In response to SF's email making a moral case for defending the land against attack, subscriber FT wrote in support of setting up a revolutionary army arguing that the Bali could not afford to sit and watch people take away the farm lands of Bali Nyonga. Another subscriber wrote:

I am in no way an advocate of violence neither is one of my village men, but to be blunt, if my brother slaps me and it hurts, I'm compelled to retaliate before thinking of my action, that is just human and no question about it. This is the current saga we face. My clarion call is, it's incumbent to save a dynasty and if any meaningful dialogue is to occur with the Bawock neighborhood, the later must accept their subordinate status and pay allegiance to his Majesty henceforth. If care is not taken, the Bawock squalor will be a precursor for subsequent tribes in the union to demand autonomy.

MG

The language and tone of some of the emails is not to be unexpected in electronic discussion groups of this nature. Scholarship of computer mediated communication has suggested that the anonymity and de-individualization of electronic interaction sustained through globally networked computers encourages comparatively higher levels of unrestrained communication than face-to-face interaction, especially hostile verbal behaviour (Chan, 2005). In addition to asserting the warfare prowess of Bali Nyonga as evidenced in previously cited postings, several subscribers to the forum also constructed Bali Nyonga as morally and socially superior to Bawock through a frequent reference to the Bawock leader as “chief”. This was often in juxtaposition to the reference to the leader of Bali Nyonga as a “Fon” – constructed as a superior position. For instance:

It is regrettable that the Chief of Bawock should lead his people, with erroneous irredentism in mind. How can he start a fight with the Bali-Nyonga who lodged Chief Ntango'and his followers when they migrated from Bangante and arrived in Bali-Nyonga. Does he know the history of the Bagante settlement? [...]

GG

I have been provoked by the statements that the quarter head of bawock keeps making. i think it is time to remind all that it is so much undue honour to call bawock a village.bawock is a quarter in the BALI NYONGA FONDOM with a quarter head who has for 5 decades paid allegiance to their HOST until a young sibling who surely ran away from school to inherit a peaceful quarter imposed himself as a 2nd class quarter head as he himself calls himself.

GT

And in response to another posting to the group, GM wrote:

Your thorough diagnosis of the current pseudo-imperialism, perpetrated by the rookie Chief Nana who in actuality is a quarter head in Bali Nyonga should enlighten all the historical dummies who think otherwise.

GM

As earlier noted, Cameroon's social classification of traditional rulers ranks some chieftancies as first class “fons” and others as

“chiefs”. Within this social classification, a Fon has a relatively bigger jurisdiction than a chief. Nevertheless, both terms are frequently used interchangeably within popular discourse. Indeed, several traditional rulers are addressed as Fons regardless of what rank of cheiftancy they officially belong to. To some extent, it is possible that references to the Bawock leader as a chief could have been informed by an understanding of the existing social classification of traditional rulers in the Cameroon grassfields. However, other postings point to the use of the term “chief” with reference to the Bawock ruler to imply inferior and subordinate.

Traditional Institutions and Cultural Practices

Another thread of discussions of the crisis within the forum, focused on the role and place of traditional institutions particularly the Voma cult in Bali society. As earlier indicated, the crisis between the two communities emerged after a scuffle over the performance of the Voma ritual. In an email with the subject line: “THIS IS A CRYING SHAME. Bali Nyonga Vs Bawok” subscriber SA articulated the view that Voma had no place in Bali suggesting that there was no use for such an institution:

My prayers are with all the families in Bawok. Are the Bali Nyonga people thinking about all the children that have been made homeless? All the mothers that will not be able to feed their children because they cannot go to the farm and harvest food? I am really mad about the whole mess. What is wrong with this VOMA CULT. I hear a Church/prayer house got burnt down because the pastor will not let the VOMA Cult hang their "fetish bag " on the door of his church.

I just came back from Bali. Bali Nyonga needs help and not VOMA or NGUMBA. What progress has VOMA or Ngumba brought to Bali.

If the VOMA cult was attacked, why did the Bali people not look for the equivalent of VOMA in Bawok and burn down, why go around and burnt down the homes of innocent women and children. Is this suppose to be some kind of Bali pride? Excuse me because I do not want to be part of this chaos.

SA

The utility of the Voma cult in an increasingly urbanized Bali had previously been the subject of a heated discussion on the forum. For instance, in February 2006, a subscriber’s email questioning the

relevance of Voma to present day Bali Nyonga had prompted a vibrant discussion on the forum. SA's email expressing a similar view introduced another thread of discussion concerning the crisis. For instance the following mails:

"Voma is the highest Bali-Nyonga traditional cult used for cleansing. No one will mess with this cult that is highly respected by the Balis according to Bali-Nyonga tradition and get away with it.

GG.

Irrespective of the God(s) that we believe in and if they did not make these cults, plus, no matter what development they have brought to Bali, one thing is certain, the LELA and VOMA are something for which the Bali people are not yet ready to compromise with those who stand against them for the simple reason of not seeing these their tradition, period. I am inventing nothing here.

GK

To an extent, the discussion on Voma as well as the recurrent discussions about traditional institutions and cultural practices, illustrate that similar to the way in which the myths, rituals, symbols, history, and other imaginaries are used to construct a nation (Fung 2002) for many subscribers to the group, the communicative space created by Mbonbani offers a site not only for the collective (re)construction of memories and imagining of the homeland, but creates a space for probing cultural institutions and practices in ways not documented before.

In response to SA's mail, subscriber KL sent an email taking issue with the criticisms of Voma and cautioning subscribers against using the current crisis as opportunity to criticise Bali customs and practices arguing that traditional and Christian religion had always coexisted:

I wish and hope that our emotional outburst on the crisis in Bali not dissuade us into making irrational and inadvertent remarks about our cultural ethos. Christianity has always existed side by side with traditional occultic practices in Bali. Each respected the boundaries of the other. For us to think that Voma has done nothing to Bali insinuates ignorance if you are a Bali citizen. Are we at the sametime saying that Christianity has enabled grops [sic] to grow in Mantum, Butu and Mbofung? Mind you when our great great ancestors were praying for us new generation, they poured libations and chase evil from the land. That made you and I to be born in peace and love.

Now that western education has exposed us to christinity [sic] we now turn around and condemn Voma and Ngumba. Kve fob ni touh!!! Show me how the multiplicity of church buildings in Bali has turn away our thirteen years old from prostitution, theft and burglary and HIV/AIDS? On the contrary the fear of transgressing "Voma and ngumba" has brought order and love. Have you ever seen christian Bali Women defying Voma by dancing and facing the cult or follow the lela train to Nchi Sufu? Why? If the Christian God can protect them why don't they venture? Agreed, maybe the story about hanging the Voma on the church door was valid. But is this not an attempt to see whether the two cultures can harmonize? When pope John Paul 1 died I was still in Bali. I saw "nkong Fon" in the catholic church representing the presence of the Fon. There was no clash? Cardinal Tumi has struck a deal in the Vatican for indiginous traditions in Cameroon to co-mingled with western practices. So let no one DARE DEFY the lore of the land!!!![original emphasis]

KL

Still writing in support of the continuing relevance of Voma, subscriber GT argued as follows:

... It (Voma) has brought PEACE,UNITY,GOOD HARVEST,FECUNDITY and the PROTECTION of ALL THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF BALI NYONGA ORIGIN WHEREVER THEY ARE[original emphasis]. It is the root of the very existence of that community and its people. When we start questioning the raison d,etre of our traditional institutions it means we are questioning our very existence. We ll one day question why our fons are not being elected. since the singsong that we have imbibed is DEMOCRACY, elections and the like.I challenge anybody to proof me wrong that our traditional polical institutions are the best and most stable than any so called DEMOCRACY in the whole world Unfortunately we have been caught in the trap of what some call "civilisation"or "modern society"

We want to copy anything coming from outside. We seem to be cutting the very branch on which we sit. This explains why we re gradually destroying our social values. In this way we prefer to develop our societies by opening up mortuaries than schools or provide potable water:[...] We demarcate boundaries with barbwire instead of the peace plants(nkeng nkeng). We spent time eating strange foods that come with strange diseases because we want to be considered civilised or modern. Our children can hardly make a simple sentence in our mother tongues all in the name of civilisation.[...]It is also urgent for us to

strengthen the few traditional values left and to revalorise others. In this way, we can join the GLOBAL village with something unique to us and from us. Something like the VOMA institution and many others should continuously be preserved and with the last jot of our blood. OUR VALUES HAVE NEVER BEEN A PROBLEM INSTEAD THEY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN OUR SOLUTION UNTILL WE BECAME "CIVILISED"

GT

Resistance to criticisms of traditional institutions seem informed by an opposition to the continuing influences of Christianity, Western imperialism and the processes of globalization on traditional African society. The above emails to the forum highlight how a preoccupation with maintaining cultural integrity and authenticity in the midst of increasing urbanization remains an essential part of negotiating ethnic identity politics.

Conclusion

The communicative space offered by Mbonbani@yahoogroups.com illustrates the of role the internet in facilitating virtual connections between dispersed Bali Nyonga indigenes in the diaspora. Discussions on Mbonbani contribute to the development and maintenance of a public sphere in which understandings of the homeland, identities and belonging are imagined, articulated and debated. To some extent, such connections in cyberspace assist in maintaining a sense of cultural identity for immigrants away from their homeland.

In examining the discussions of the Bali-Bawock crisis on the forum it is evident that the composition of the forum (populated mostly by Bali Nyonga citizens) did translate into a unified point of view about the role of Bali Nyonga in the crisis or a cause of action to pursue. Despite individual emails which called for peace, tolerance and respect for human rights, and property, there was never any collective action for which members of the forum mobilized. Instead, the articulation and advancement of particular positions and actions to the media was left to organizations with a physical structure. For instance, the US based Bali Cultural Association (whose members make up the bulk of subscribers to Mbonbani) subsequently issued a

statement condemning the destruction of property and displacement of people. That the discussions ended online, showed the limitations of virtual ethnic communities of this nature in mobilizing action. On the contrary, several national virtual communities have been shown to use the internet particularly online discussion groups to mobilize demonstrators as well as debate and influence national political processes (see for instance (Bernal 2006). Indeed, the image of the warrior nation emerged as a prominent theme in online discussions of the crisis illustrating how a circumscription to history and the mutability of ethnic identities remains an important feature of virtual ethnic communities (Elkins, 1997).

From the discussions on the forum, it is clear that the majority of subscribers who wrote to the forum in reaction to the crisis, considered the Balis to be at war following a deliberate provocation by the Bawock. Whether speaking in defence of the initial actions of the Bali, criticising the destruction of property and displacement of people in Bali, embedded in most of the online discussion was an articulation of understandings of Bali identity and a sense of belonging rooted in the history of the Balis. The forum became an avenue both to construct and resist, challenge, and speak against criticisms of Bali Nyonga. Simultaneously, discussions allowed for the production and presentation of particular images of Bali to Mbonbani subscribers. Discursive strategies used by most posters to the forum during the crisis drew from and reproduced constructions of Bali Nyonga as a warrior group and superior entity. Though these imaginations of the homeland emerged in a time of perceived threat to the homeland, conceptions of the territorial motherland evidenced then, enable us to observe the process and context of imagining the homeland.

What is not clear is whether particular points of discussions/questions emanated mainly because of the location of most forum participants (i.e. away from home). The findings reported here are context specific and may not apply to other online discussion groups composed of members of specific ethnic groups. In addition, the findings are limited in that the internet remains an elitist medium - subscribers to Mbonbani represent only the computer literate, urbanized who have ready access to a networked

computer. Further research might consider expanding on the issues highlighted here through in-depth interviews with subscribers of the forum to examine the intersection between participation in virtual communities and subscribers' constructions of the homeland.

Chapter Six

Language Use in a Multicultural Online Community

Patience Fielding

A lot has been said about the Internet creating a global village, reducing space and time and maintaining a sense of community. Discussions abound on the Internet as a new means of global communication and its great impact on language use. The strong presence of online English has caused consternation among many and has stirred debates on how the Internet serves the needs of language titans while neglecting the needs of smaller groups. Many scholars have expressed concern about the dominance of world English and the Internet as a new arena for its spread (Mair 2002; Nunberg 2002; Dor 2004). Some view the spread of English as a “natural” or benign extension of globalization (Fishman, Conrad, and Ruybal-Lopez 1996; Fishman 1998; Crystal 2000, 2003). Others take a dimmer view, writing of “linguistic imperialism” and its threat to the status of smaller languages (Phillipson 1992; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 2001; Pakir in press). Although the Internet may be accelerating the globalization process each society or culture tends to have a set of localized linguistic practices online that distinguishes its members from other significant groups (Appadurai 1996; Hongladarom 2000). In this paper I examine language use on Mbonbani, a Diasporic egroup of indigenes of Bali Nyonga, a village in Cameroon West Africa where Mungaka is the indigenous language. To analyze social change in Bali as it pertains to a new dynamic, I look at the use of the Bali language in domains beyond its immediate borders. I focus particularly on the presence of Mungaka in a virtual community to highlight how Mungaka has moved from strictly oral traditional spheres to an online environment, co-existing with larger languages such as English, French and Cameroon Pidgin English. I also provide a brief history of the sociolinguistic situation in Cameroon, the home country of the Mbonbani participants. I highlight the role of globalization in the creation of Diasporic

populations of Cameroonians and Bali indigenes which has resulted in the existence the pockets of multilinguals scattered on various parts of the globe. I move to consider how the Internet fits in this Diasporic environment with its provision of new ways of disseminating information, facilitation of contact over space and time and building Mbonbani, a new online community. I observe the communication practices in this forum and analyze how language use in a virtual community reflects a new dynamic by transcending territorial boundaries. While members of this Diasporic community use language and the Internet to construct, negotiate, renegotiate, contest and deconstruct their individual and group identities based on local, religious, national and global ideologies (Rai 1995; Mitra 1997, 1997; Lal 1999; Iganacio 2000; Bahri 2001), they also adapt their ways of being to the new technologies to foreground an indigenous language which otherwise would remain in a strictly oral environment. I argue that the Internet provides affordances for the creation of a linguistic space where participants appropriate new technologies to advance and enhance cultural traditions even in such situations of language shift. I highlight how participants use both their home language, Mungaka as well as English to maintain themselves. I make the case that the Internet is a boon not only to English but potentially to many other languages, especially minority languages that bridge geographically dispersed speakers as evident in the numerous examples of technology use for language revitalization (Warschauer 1998; Cunliffe and Herring 2005). I conclude that contrary to the belief that smaller languages are disappearing at alarming rate (Wurm 1991; Krauss 1992; Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000), the spread of the Internet is bringing new languages online with pockets of bilinguals even in very small languages such as Mungaka. Thus, although it is the case that English had a head start in Internet use over other languages, it is also the case that the Internet has made it possible for other languages, both 'big' (e.g. German, French Japanese and Spanish) and 'small' (e.g. Mungaka), to exist on the Internet. I conclude with implications of the study, reflect on their broader implications and speculate about potential venues for further inquiry.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study investigates language use and ideologies as manifested in an online forum and seeks to find out the following:

- How does language use in an online Diasporic group mediate culture and reflect the traditional values and practices of a people?
- How have cultural trends adapted to emerging technologies?

Mbonbani, a multicultural Diasporic online community, is a linguistic space that has been carved out for the people of Bali Nyonga descent. Friends and spouses of Bali people from other regions in Cameroon are also members of this online community. Results from a survey administered to Mbonbani members indicate that 97% of the respondents identify themselves as Bali indigenes while 3% are from other regions and ethnic groups in Cameroon. Majority of the population in Bali have family members at the nuclear level who live in England, the United States, Germany, Holland, Asia. Mbonbani members have internet access and use its facilities not only to keep in touch with family and friends but to reconstitute or enact “Bali-ness” online quite often with other Bali people living in the Diaspora. I was drawn to conducting an ethnography on Mbonbani because of the complex nature of the communicative practices that participants engage in. These practices demonstrate that the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless cyberspace. Rather it is one of numerous new technologies used by diverse people in real world locations to negotiate cultures and identities. These on-line technologies are enabling individuals in Diasporic groups to sustain inter-continental networks (Karim 1998). Hence there is much to be gained in an ethnographic investigation on how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated by the participants on Mbonbani. A focus on this online community will tell us how a particular group of people engage in online communications, what they make of it, how they can relate its possibilities to themselves and their futures. In this sense I will not only talking about the “use” or “effects” of a new medium but how members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves in a transforming communicative

environment, how they can find themselves in this environment and at the same time mould it to their own image. This will also allow us understand the very different universes of social and technical possibilities have developed around the Internet and how minority cultures are using these possibilities to foreground themselves. In order to establish an empirical context I start with a brief survey of language use among Bali indigenes offline. A questionnaire developed to monitor language choice and behaviour, asked members to describe their language use and competence offline. While Mungaka, Cameroon Pidgin English, French and English are the languages of communication in this forum, the dominance of English is very apparent. Mungaka which is normally used in oral settings does not have a unified written system. Yet new technologies have allowed its emergence online in written form as members engage in communication exchanges that reflect traditional cultural practices. Through code switching and language mixing on Mbonbani, participants co-create indigenous knowledge and negotiate identities using the languages that are available to the group.

This study takes a qualitative and ethnographic approach (Hymes 1974). A primary set of interactional data was collected between September 2008 and April 2009. Participant observation and logging of messages were the primary methods for data collection. I gained access into Mbonbani by personally subscribing and sometimes participating in the online discussions. I intervened in some of these exchanges, and also had private exchanges with other members. During this period, exchanges addressing various aspects of language and cultural belonging were culled from the message board. I collected data from the public exchanges—"public" in the sense that they (a) were available to all the people who subscribed to the lists in which they took place and (b) the subscription process was quite easy, so any person with access to electronic mail could potentially participate. Once the data were collected, I coded the exchanges and did a qualitative content analysis of the messages. Helped by my understanding of Bali culture and migrant experience experiences in the Diaspora, I centred my analytic gaze on how the Internet has been adapted to suit users' discourses and practices. Interviews were also conducted on member's choice and use of language on

Mbonbani online forum. Looking at the patterns in the discussion, I underscore how aspects Bali Nyonga language and culture are consciously and unconsciously negotiated on the forum. The particularities of language use on Mbonbani also highlight how a multiplicity of languages is used to construct and deconstruct meaning and how identities are negotiated even in such cases of language shift and language mixing.

The Sociolinguistic Situation in Cameroon, Home Country of Mbonbani Indigenes

Cameroon is a multilingual country comprising 247 indigenous languages, two official languages and Cameroon Pidgin English (Breton and Fohtung 1991; Boum Ndong-Semengue and Sadembouo 1999). Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) is widely used not only in the North-West and South-West provinces, but also in the Littoral and West provinces. The two official languages, English and French, were introduced in 1916 when Britain and France shared Cameroon into two unequal parts after defeating the German forces in the country. The new colonial masters then imposed their languages in the areas of education and administration. This led to the solid implantation of the two languages during the colonial era, a situation that was later reinforced after Cameroon became independent.

Language Policy during the Colonial Era

During the pre-colonial period some indigenous languages had already gained a considerable degree of prestige. Although the German colonial administration (1884-1916) encouraged the use of German, German Missionaries and the American Presbyterian Missionaries preferred indigenous languages like Basaa, Bulu, Duala, Ewondo and Mungaka for teaching and evangelization (Mbuagbaw 2000:135). Throughout the German colonial period, indigenous languages continued to enjoy a somewhat comfortable position as far as linguistic communication was concerned. Following the defeat of Germany in Cameroon, language policy witnessed some changes with the arrival of new colonial powers. In the territory under British mandate, some indigenous languages like Bafut, Duala, Kenyang and

Mungaka were used alongside with English in schools (Bitja'a Kody 1999:82). The language situation in French-speaking Cameroon during this period was characterized by perpetual language conflict between missionaries who persisted in the use of indigenous languages and the French colonial administration (cf. Stumpf 1979; Bitja'a Kody 1999). French was promoted while indigenous languages were strongly discouraged. In 1917, the French colonial administration instituted a special subvention for schools that used French as the language of instruction. Eventually, schools that taught in indigenous languages were closed down. This notwithstanding, indigenous languages continued to serve not only for evangelization but also for popular communication. In other words, while the official language remained the monopoly of official communication, the indigenous languages dominated unofficial communication in churches, the market place, cultural celebrations, ritual ceremonies, and the home. Thus language policies put in place by the Germans, the British and the French did in no way favour the emergence of an indigenous language that could easily serve as a national language at independence.

Language Policy in Post-colonial Cameroon

At independence, Cameroon, like many other African countries, opted for the 'neutral' foreign language option as official language in order to avoid language conflict on the one hand and unwarranted financial and material cost on the other. French was the official language in French-speaking Cameroon while English assumed the same status in the English-speaking sector of Cameroon. At reunification of the two sectors on October 1st, 1961, English and French became the official languages of the new Federal Republic of Cameroon. As for the indigenous languages, they virtually had no place in the early years of the post-independence era. To date the linguistic scenario in Cameroon continues to be characterized by dense multilingualism; the official dominance of ex-colonial languages; the official neglect of indigenous languages; the unsevered colonial umbilical cord; and socio-politically interwoven language-related problems (Adegbija 2000:80).

The Current Place of Indigenous Languages

In Cameroon where official usage is reserved solely for official languages (French and English), indigenous languages continue to be limited largely to oral usage, as well as in rural and family circles. As Bitja'a Kody (2001) aptly remarks:

Les langues nationales sont réduites à un usage oral, grégaire et familial. Leur fonction emblématique n'est exploitée qu'à des fins politiques ponctuelles lors des campagnes électorales. Aucune de ces langues n'est utilisée ni dans l'administration, ni dans la presse écrite, ni dans la publicité, ni à la télévision nationale, ni dans l'enseignement formel, ni dans les campagnes d'alphabétisation financées par le budget de l'Etat. (Indigenous languages are reduced to usage in oral, rural and family contexts. Their emblematic function is exploited only for sporadic political ends during electoral campaigns. These languages are neither used in the Administration, the written media, publicity, national television, formal education, nor in sensitization campaigns financed by the State budget.)

The very existence of indigenous languages is threatened today, especially in towns and cities where more and more young people tend to use the official languages from childhood. Even remote villages are no exceptions as foreign languages continue their gradual encroachment into the linguistic spaces of the locals. A Mbonbani subscriber encapsulates this phenomenon in this statement:

In the Bali of today, you are most likely to hear more English, Cameroon Pidgin English and French being spoken than Mungaka, because every one - the young and old alike - thinks it's a cool thing to do. (J.N)

According to Bitja'a Kody (2001), findings from an earlier study carried out on language use in the city of Yaounde reveal that 32% of young people between 10 and 17 years old in Yaounde, the nation's capital, do not speak any Cameroonian indigenous language. French is their only language of communication. The author affirms that this population is bound to increase exponentially by the next generation, given that such Cameroonians will not be in a position to transmit the indigenous languages to their children. This situation is suicidal for the indigenous languages. Indigenous languages still continue to

be completely absent from the school curriculum while French, English, German and Spanish continue to dominate. In Bali, while Mungaka is taught informally at the Chief's palace, it remains largely excluded from the curriculum in mainstream schools.

The History of Mungaka

Mungaka, a Bantoid language, is the first language of the Bali-Nyonga, a village in the north west of Cameroon. There are an estimated 45,000 native speakers of Mungaka, and many more non-native speakers. Most Bali-Nyonga also speak Cameroon Pidgin English. The adoption of Mungaka as a language of communication by the Basel Mission Church when they arrived the country in 1903, led to an extensive and intensive use of Mungaka for both church and secular interactions. It was subsequently initiated into formal education and was at one point the lingua franca taught by Swiss-German missionaries. Mungaka became one of the first Cameroonian languages to be codified. Based on a slightly modified German orthography, a Mungaka vocabulary glossary was soon developed. By 1915, a translation of Bible stories was available in Mungaka. Outside Bali Nyonga, Mungaka became a lingua-franca for non-native speakers. Used as a language of communication in many parts of the Northwest, it enjoyed the status of other widely spoken languages such a Douala, Ewondo and Ffulde. Relatively few people are schooled in Mungaka, and many native speakers unable to properly use the Mungaka orthography, have developed an anglicised orthography which results in an unorthodox but fairly intelligible script. (e.g. 'Bang'-walking stick and 'tang'-arithmetic.) Nevertheless, whilst the written form of Mungaka is formal and standardized, the spoken form remains less formal and more diversified characterized by code switching, language mixing and various forms of linguistic interference.

The Rise of Mungaka Diasporic Populations

For a quarter-century following independence, Cameroon was one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. Cameroon with a population of over 10 million inhabitants became plagued with low

per capita income, high population growth, lack of basic facilities with respect to health care and education, poor infrastructure and an unstable political situation. With the decreasing economic growth and a downward tendency which continued through the 1980's Cameroon saw a decrease in exports small share of domestic savings in GDP and increase in capital flows. Cameroon had to accept structural adjustment with the exigencies of globalization. As part of the plan to open the market and compete with the global economy, Cameroon had to undertake these Structural Adjustment Plans. They included large-scale privatization of enterprises that were publicly controlled during the 1960s and 1970s which would lead to the emergence of a private sector that can take the lead in terms of investments and the creation of employment and wealth. But these goals failed to deliver as Cameroon still remains in the margins of capital flows. As a result Cameroon witnessed a surge in immigration as the economic downturn forced people to migrate abroad for education and economic reasons. This resulted in the formation of huge Diasporic populations of Bali indigenes and Cameroonians on different parts of the globe. Indigenes have remained in contact with their place of origin using communication technologies to reconstruct what it means to be a member of a territorially, historically, and culturally located community in situations of geographical displacement (Boczkowski 1999). Those who have desired to remain in contact with their places of origin have relied heavily upon communication technologies. Some of these include mailing lists and bulletin boards where migrants have regular exchanges with their fellow nationals, almost always about issues linked to their nationalities and their migration experiences (Li 1990; Rai 1995; Mitra 1996). In this fashion, Mbonbani, members have assumed the role and responsibility of creating and maintaining a public space for fellow diasporics (Karim 2003).

Mbonbani Egroup

Mbonbani was created in 1999 and to date has 751 members who reside on all corners of the globe. Below is a pie chart showing the distribution of members on the globe.

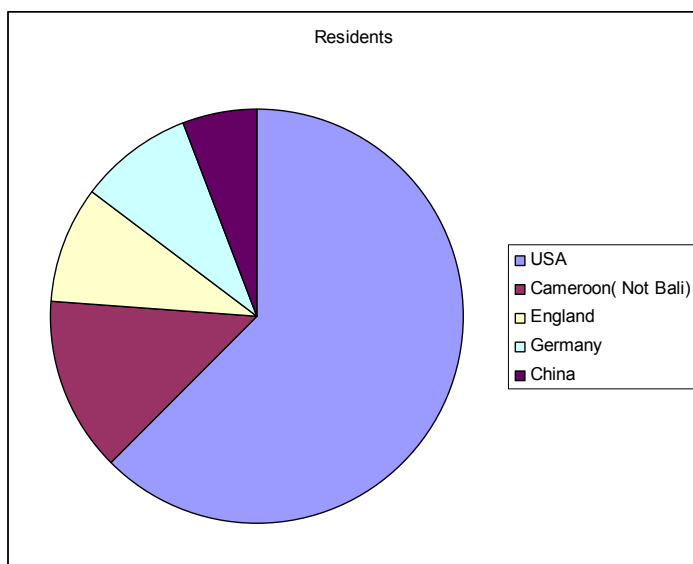


Figure 5: Pie Chart of Mbonbani membership

Group members share news on the homeland, list diasporic events, and provide relevant links to the home culture. The egroup provides a virtual public space where diaspora members “can meet” others like themselves, where they can discuss and negotiate their weness (Goel 2004). Participation in this space is primarily framed in the experience of negotiating identity “between poles of original homeland and a newly acquired host culture” (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000:15). Mbonbani is a moderated forum with a single moderator. To belong to the group, individuals have to send a request to the moderator to have their email addresses added to the listserv. Prospective members are required to have two sponsors who should be existing members of good standing in the forum. This move is to avoid anonymous emails as postings can be traced to individuals. This action not only allows for openness within the forum for but also allows for self regulation with members serving as gatekeepers of the underlying rules of respect and proper behaviour. A discussion usually starts with a series of replies to an initial post. This could spurn on for several days and threads depending on the topic. Some postings do not generate enough interest to spurn a discussion and could go largely unanswered. Such threads remain

“idle” for long periods of time but could “revived” at specific occasions. The forum adheres to strict rules of courtesy and politeness and the forum administrator may suspend member privileges if postings contributions that do not conform to the forum’s policy of courteousness and respect.

Is Mungaka an endangered language?

According the Linguistic Society of America an endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future when parents are no longer teaching the language to their children and are not using it actively in everyday matters. Some Mbonbani members harbour fears that the Mungaka culture and language might become extinct as members are removed from the home language environment and use other languages in education, social and economic spheres. Such fears are legitimate because when a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. Much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. This angst was captured by several subscribers in open letters to the online group.

In our attempt to seek the fulfilment of the proverbial American dream, some of us have abdicated our responsibilities towards our children.....cases where a parent is busy calling for pizza or Chinese food, or taco delivery, or is busy preparing macaroni and cheese while pots of fufu, nkundong, dju', mali, ekwang, ndole or any other delicacy are simmering on the back burners. Why? Because her american pikin (dem) no longer have a taste for those African foods. You and your child do not even speak the same language anymore; you might have become too sophisticated to speak Mungaka.....Let's hold on to our children but most importantly, allow them to develop affirmative connections with Bali, Cameroon and Africa... speak Mungaka with them, and make them eat the same food from the same pots as everyone else and at the same time! (PPB)

We are going to loose our culture and tradition by neglecting the role of children..... Our children are neither Americans nor Cameroonians. We have

lost our bearings in a foreign culture by neglecting our culture and tradition that define us. Now most of us who....have been blessed to acquire western education, have decided to throw our language, culture and tradition in the rubbish pit(KL)

Members in Diasporic regions lack opportunities to engage in Mungaka just like in their home country. A survey of participants reveals that Mungaka was the language predominantly used during their childhood days in the home country.

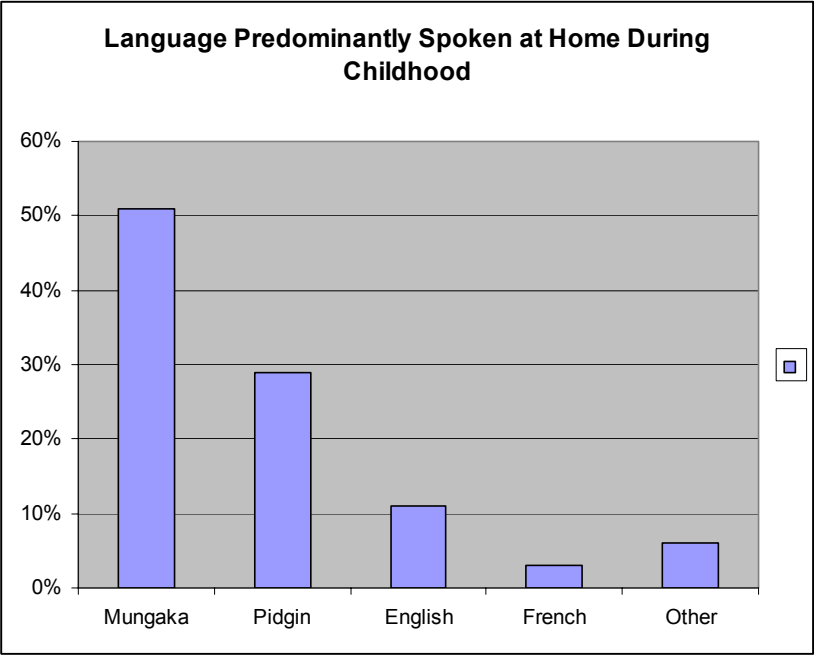


Figure 6: Chart Showing Language predominantly spoken at home during Childhood

Currently Diasporic populations do not use Mungaka rampantly in everyday situations as was the case when they were growing up. Just 33% of the participants surveyed speak Mungaka to their children at home. There are several reasons for the limited use of Mungaka in current times. The urban drift of often younger population and the clustering of Diasporic populations in new homelands have taken indigenes away from their village where Mungaka is the primary language. Away from their homeland some

indigenes perceive their language as lacking in prestige and feel the pressure to integrate with a larger more powerful linguistic group of their new residence. They therefore master other languages at the detriment of their own. Only 9% of the survey participants had Mungaka instruction in their primary years. Mungaka is used orally and is not officially taught in schools. As a result members have not quite mastered the Mungaka orthography and can only carry out written communication in French and English, the official languages learnt in schools during their childhood years.

Here is a snapshot of the Mungaka capabilities of Mbonbani members.

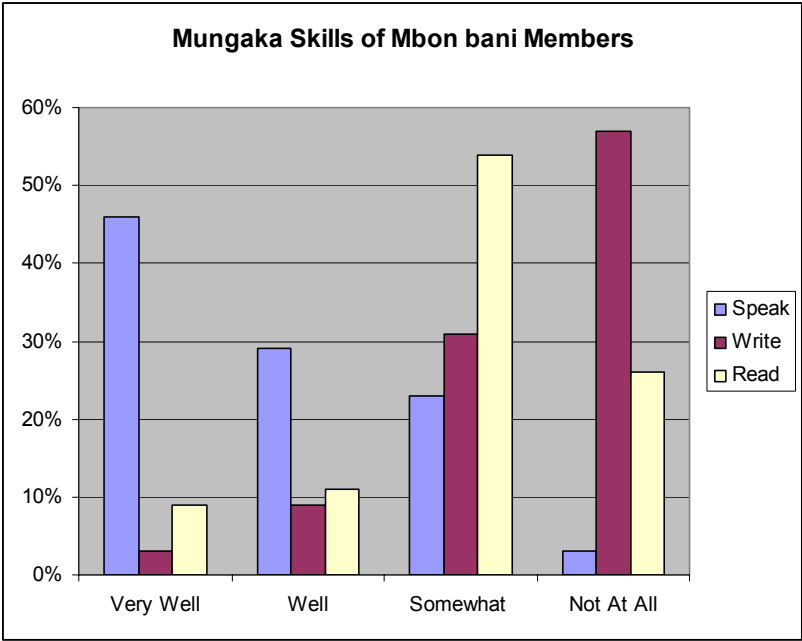


Figure 7: Chart showing Mungaka skills of Mbonbani members

Since very few members know how to read in Mungaka, written Mungaka on the forum is usually accompanied by an English translation. The question thus arises if the dominance of English as the language of computation, Internet and the World Wide Web contribute to undermining the vitality and richness of ancient, non-

Anglo-Saxon, cultures online. One might be tempted to believe that is the case with Mbonbani as Cameroon is organized along linguistic lines, none of which include any indigenous language. While French and English are accepted as the lingua franca of education and business, English has become more prestigious as Cameroonians have been drawn into emerging global monoculture replete with consumerism and American-influenced culture with great popular appeal. English is thus regarded as the privileged route to becoming a global citizen and the reliable key to any reasonable hope of wealth, preferment and influence. Not surprising younger generations of Cameroonian descent acquire a fine supply of the English language much to the chagrin of some members who believe Mungaka will become extinct if this practice continues. Since language shapes, organizes and structures what we communicate, how we think and what we experience, the angst of losing the Mungaka language and culture may be legitimate. But upon closer examination of language use on the Mbonbani forum traditional ways of being are still maintained on the forum even in cases of language shift. Even though English is predominantly used online, a space has been created as well for the Mungaka language and Bali culture.

Members use this online community to engage in cultural practices like disseminating announcements such as death and wake keeping. Death ceremonies and funeral rites are very elaborate in Bali and the event could span a couple of days. When death occurs in the community at home or abroad, announcements on the wake keeping, funeral and “cry-die” are disseminated on the forum to serve as reminders for members to acknowledge the passage of life. Members who cannot attend any of the events send out of condolence messages and eulogies to the bereaved family through the forum.

Additionally books and magazines on Bali History and Culture are advertised and sold online to cater to the needs of individuals who are removed from the immediacy of home language environment. These reading materials seek to provide a traditional and cultural context for individuals who are resident miles away from their homeland.

Historical and cultural anecdotes, articles and short essays are sporadically provided by individuals on various aspects of the Bali

people. A recent article on the “Lela Festival” provided historical perspective of this annual tradition while an article on “The Ayaba Factor” gave a brief history of one of the pioneers of Bali Nyonga

Members also engage in transnational politics by keeping abreast in matters of home politics. While village and palace updates keep participants informed on village happenings and events from the Chief’s palace, projects carried out at the palace and in Bali are also reported on the forum.

Updates on educational and professional achievements of individuals are announced to promote the shared sense of success and to open up conversations for mentorship; an extension of informal learning and apprenticeship. Traditional music and a dance come alive in video and music clips, disseminated for the shared values and to imbibe cultural values in younger children. Religion and devotionals too are integral parts in the Bali Nyonga lifestyle and are widely disseminated on the forum. Members are also constantly reminded to fulfil their civic duty and responsibility in the both home and host countries while elders are often called upon to mediate disputes between individuals and families.

Language Use on Mbonbani

For the purpose of this study, I look at how language and traditional practices are mediated online to underscore how the language now transcends bounded spaces as diasporic populations use their indigenous language as well as English to negotiate culture and traditional ways of being in an online forum. I focus on exchanges where Mungaka and English are used side by side to negotiate meaning and engage participants in discussions. I also look at www.balinyonga.com, a website about the Bali Nyonga village to underscore ways in which natives use emerging technologies to foreground their ways of being. In the following discussion I focus on particular quizzes and miscellaneous requests for particular bits of information. Quizzes are usually trivial in nature. When a quiz is given members of all ages attempt to answer in a bid to win a prize. The questions are framed entirely in English and sometimes a mix of English, Mungaka and Cameroon Pidgin English is used. Mungaka is rarely used entirely because of the limited number of Mungaka

writers and readers on the forum. The questions range from specific aspects of the Mungaka language to day-to-day occurrences in the village. Below is a sample quiz. It is worth noting that participants are required to draw on their knowledge of Mungaka language and traditional rites during death celebrations or “Keung Vu”:

In Bali Nyonga, there are several advise that are given to mourners, sympathizers and well-wishers regarding death celebration or "cry-die". ONE advise in particular stands out and is universally/widely accepted. What is it?(BF)

The following is a quiz that is framed using both English and Cameroon Pidgin English languages.

In Mungaka, there is a word that refers to what in the English Language refers to: Sweetheart, Dear, Love - in short, terms of endearment to your lover, wife, "njumba". What is the word?(BF)

In another quiz, members are asked to describe a specific aspect *Lela* dance, a yearly festival that draws crowds of Bali indigenes and visitors the world over in a four-day celebration. Yet another quiz calls on participants to draw on their knowledge of the customs and norms of meal sharing in Bali. In the case where the questions can be interpreted using individual's personal and family history, a prize is given to everyone who attempts the question. There is a shared sense of community as members draw on their collective knowledge in their exchanges with one another. A quiz would start a chain of exchanges which could last over a couple of days until the correct response is offered. Participants engage in discussions in the quest for the right answers and they would sometimes debate one another on the validity of a response. Some participants demonstrate superiority of knowledge by infusing a historical context in their responses. In general, the exchanges employ cultural specific language and participants use all the languages at their disposal to negotiate meaning and identity. In this environment of language plurality, Mungaka language and culture is fore grounded.

Miscellaneous requests on the other hand, are sporadic requests for specific bits of information on the Mungaka language and culture.

Members who respond to such requests for information are usually older folks with a sound knowledge of the language and culture. Such members are well versed in the customs and traditions of the people and command the authority and respect of the readers. Just like the quizzes, the requests generate a lot of responses although no prizes are offered. Such members with a sound knowledge of the norms and customs of the Bali people would provide answers to such requests and would sometimes engage in debates on the validity of the information. Below is an example of one of such requests where a subscriber sends out an email requesting names of fruits and animals in Mungaka. This request prompts the following response:

Greetings to you and the family. Below is your list with the Mungaka appellations:

Animals	Ba	nyam
Tortoise	-	<i>nkimanko'</i>
Lion	-	<i>Bu'mben</i>
Tiger	-	<i>Ngū</i>
Elephant	-	<i>Swuen</i>
Duck	-	<i>Ngob-Ntsi</i>
Cow	-	<i>Nyam-Ntsi</i>

Fruits	Ba	Ntam-ntu
Banana	-	<i>Lipo'</i>
Pineapple	-	<i>Panapu</i> (Ntsu Panapo=Idiomatic expression)
Mango	-	<i>Manguli</i>
Orange	-	<i>Lamsi</i>
<i>Tsi mbonkad nfo'ti ngod u.</i>		
<i>A bo mu Gablia mo Gwangwa'a</i>		

Another subscriber labels “cow” as “mfong” and this leads to a follow up question.

Can any of you clarify if cow is both 'mfong' and 'nyam ntsi'? I mean can both appellations be used interchangeably?

The above question prompts the following response:

As for the cow translation, there is the short horn specie of cows that was common in Bambui and Buea that is called "Mfong". The Mungaka dictionary uses "mfong" as the translation for cow. "Mfong" fearlessly roamed the streets in Bali-Nyonga, independently without any control, and returned to Titam where their salt ration was deposited.....Cow was called "Nyam-Ntsi" because they were led to the stream twice or thrice per day to either drink water or cross to grazing areas. This was also contingent upon the season. Their share of salt ration was deposited around where the herds-men lodged in the huts.

From the above it is worth noting that “nyam’ means “animal” while “ntsi” means water. Literally cows would be called ‘water animals’ because of their drinking ritual at the stream. These historical perspectives serve to clarify word meanings and give readers a socio-historical context of appellations. While all interlocutors on the Mbonbani forum share a common language, English, linguistic accommodation is made for non-Mungaka speakers on the forum by language mixing and language shift. The multilingual situation on the forum is reflective of the diglossia that characterizes the Cameroon multilingual home language situation; two languages of high prestige are used by the government and in formal texts, and the languages of low prestige, are usually the spoken vernacular tongue. While the high-prestige language is used in formal settings, the indigenous languages tend to be used in oral settings. Online Mbonbani members have re-appropriated diglossia or linguistic plurality by using English to parlay Mungaka, a language that would otherwise stay in the oral realm. The following is an example of language diglossia; the interlocutor in uses three languages in one speech act.

Who is his/her mother?English

Na who be e mam? Pidgin

Na e beh war? Mungaka

Although English is favoured over indigenous or minority language in situations of language shift (Paolilli; Sperlich, 2005), the alphabet has enabled the visibility of Mungaka online. Mungaka

would normally be used in oral, non formal situations. But on Mbonbani forum, the presence of indigenes all corners of the globe has resulted in a Mungaka presence online as members infuse indigenous words in their sentences and engage in cultural debates and discussions. Sometimes Mungaka words are spelled differently depending on the alphabet used but the meaning is not lost to forum participants. The following two sentences both mean “*Keep Well*”, even though they are spelled differently by two interlocutors using two different alphabets.

Chi mbonkad English alphabet

tsi mbonkăd German alphabet

While written English would require strict adherence to a codified system, Mungaka online is enabled by the mixing of various linguistic units (words, phrases, clauses, and sentences) from two participating grammatical systems. Yet members would seldom correct the written Mungaka online. On the other hand if the content or historical context was wrong, there would be a flurry of responses to correct the fallacy.

The Internet thus affords the creation of a cultural space where traditional values of the Bali Nyonga are enacted within a collective virtual community. These online interactions are not divorced from the off-line social contexts within which participants live their daily lives. Once on-line, participants draw on their off-line resources, as well as understandings gained in offline experiences, to negotiate and interpret their online interaction. English thus helps sustain a national identity which would which would possible collapse with the use of various home languages by member sub groups (Goel 2004). The Internet may be accelerating the globalization process and the spread of the English language but each society or culture tends to have a set of localized linguistic practices online that distinguishes its members from other significant groups (Appadurai 1996; Hongladarom 2000). Members of Mbonbani recently welcomed an indigenous website www.balinyonga.com. This website gives a comprehensive history of the Bali people and their origins. There is a page that profiles the Fon or traditional Chief of Bali. Historical information on the traditional annual dance, Lela, is provided as well. Pictures of events and important places in Bali on the website provide adequate visuals for

people the world over and insights about the happenings in the village. The days of the week in Mungaka, traditional Bali names and their meanings, and traditional folklores are some of the literacy events meant to educate readers about the Bali culture. The website provides information on the Municipal Council, the government body in Bali as well as a market place where books, music CDs and other items on the Bali culture are readily available on sale. This website truly projects the village and culture of Bali on the global stage by providing references, cultural occurrences, historical contexts and contact information for key people and events in Bali. The language used on the website, a mix of English and Mungaka, is not lost to us. Traditional ways of being in the village of Bali have been adapted to emerging technologies and virtual online communities and web sites are utilized to advance the cultural ways of a people and to create a space where people of Bali who reside all over the globe can negotiate their “we-ness”

Conclusion

While global migration trends have produced transnational groups related by culture, ethnicity, language, and religion, the emergence of digital technologies is enabling them to expand their communication activities to a global scale. As such the languages of these minority groups have been made visible online with the help of new technologies. To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied is to participate. To participate is to know about the rules for interaction and interaction so that movement and interaction with and within this space is possible (Markam 1998). Members of Mbonbani are aware of their online presence. Their language choice and use are the primary means of signalling cultural identity online which transcends geographical boundaries. Their use of online technologies has increased interconnectedness across international boundaries via electronic media, and hybridization of cultural content. The ability of the Internet to leap instantly across continents has opened up the possibility of new communication methods and the use of small languages other than English and creates new forums for informal exchanges among the members of geographically dispersed

communities. Arjun Appadurai (1996:18) suggests that as electronic media “increasingly link producers and audiences across national boundaries, these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay” (1996: 22). The general social function of language and the relationships among languages, speakers, on Mbonbani have been adapted to new technologies.

The Internet thus provides spaces for user interaction which ‘offer a safe and comfortable place where people of particular ethnic groups can digitally “hang out” and share their stories (Mitra 2003:1019) using a multiplicity of languages. Language use on the Mbonbani forum highlights linguistic diversity at play. Members conscientious of the fate of small and endangered languages online have made conscious efforts to project Mungaka online. Contrary to popular belief that the Internet is exclusionary to non-English speakers, the Internet fits the intensely Diasporic personal relations and communal ways of being. People recognize themselves in the Internet in various ways and find that it provides space for enacting core values, practices and identities. At the same time they are able to mould these spaces to culturally specific shapes and purposes. They engage with the Internet through versions of themselves that are both recognized and articulated by that encounter. The Internet thus serves as sites within which people from around the world design and re-design their lives through literacy practices. In both the global and local context the relationships among digital technologies, language, literacy, and an array of opportunities are complexly structured and articulated within a constellation of existing social, cultural, economic, historical and ideological factors that constitute the cultural ideology of literacy (Hawisher; Selfe 2006). In spite the dominance of English online many national as well as regional languages are becoming strengthened with and without institutional support and Mungaka is one of them. The implications are many as the Internet could serve as tool for language revitalization; it would be worthwhile doing further research.

Chapter Seven

Social Criticism through Oral Discourse in Bali Nyonga

Kehbuma Langmia

Introduction

The power of the spoken word has consistently been the hallmark of African interpersonal, group and public communication. Discourse analysis of the spoken word within the context of Africa and Africans in the Diaspora has successfully utilized Afrocentricity (Asante 1987) as the theoretical framework to fashion out meaning. This theory posits that Africa's socio-cultural context needs to occupy the centre stage in any meaningful discourse involving its people. Skilful orators in Africa used a variety of verbal and non-verbal techniques to drive home their messages. Pa Mundam, one of the veritable charismatic and brilliant orators in Bali Nyonga of Cameroon has used the power of language to attract listeners to his message.

Pa Mundam was born in 1936 in Bali Nyonga. He attended The Native Authority school in 1951 and completed standard four. He then pursued further education by enrolling at the Police Academy in Ikeja, Nigeria in 1958 where worked for three years until he was redeployed to Buea, West Cameroon in 1961. He became active in local politics and was voted as the Buea-branch sub-section secretary of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) in 1978. During this time he remained deeply involved in cultural issues in Bali Nyonga. In the 1980s when he left Buea to finally settle in Bali, he was appointed by His Royal Highness, V. S. Galega II, the Fon of Bali to the traditional council, a body charged with formulating policy on customary issues in the chieftdom of Bali. He was allocated the task of writing a policy document on widowhood issues in Bali. Upon completion of this task, he wrote a manuscript on Bali cultural traditions. Unable to publish this volume, he decided to produce 20 audio tapes on various topics on contemporary life in Bali. Mundam is married and has four children, 12 grand children and three great grand children.

In Pa Mundam's tapes, he has found favour with satire, innuendo, sarcasm, repetition, irony and wit to expose the ills of the village. He does this by recording his messages on stereo tapes that

are later duplicated in hundreds of copies and sold locally to the Bali public. Bali Nyonga town is situated approximately sixteen kilometres from Bamenda, the North West regional capital of Cameroon in West Africa. Since the village does not boast of modern technologies like private radio or television station, Pa Mundam's messages can only be distributed to the people through other means. He chooses the modern means of recorded tapes because it can be played in the homes of local residents and at public places such as the local markets.

One of the traditional forms of communication in the village prior to the arrival of modern means of communication is the traditional drum, "nkudeng"³⁴ stationed at the Fon's palace. This drum is used to summon the people or to announce urgent messages to the entire village in times of peace and war. Another form of communication is through the word of mouth. Village counsellors transmit the village Fon's Message at the market place and also during the traditional *Lela Festival*³⁵ holding the "*nkong fon*"³⁶. When the messages are being delivered the people prostrate and ululate "*chabu fon*"³⁷ in agreement. Those who are not at the marketplace or at the Lela dance arena learn about the message from those who attended.

An ordinary villager's message to the indigenes usually faces some difficulties. But suffice it to say that when someone wants to send a strong message about the theft of his domestic animal, he can use a "gong". He will strike the gong several times to call attention to the neighbours. After each stroke, he will deliver his message of warning. But this could only go as far as the listeners are willing to share the message to those who are absent. Then when the Christian missionaries came to Africa, they brought the church and school bells. These bells are still used to summon church goers and /or pupils to service. These were actually the only forms of public communicative forms in the village prior to the circulation of Pa

³⁴ Specially made traditional drum placed at the Fon's Palace for announcing important messages.

³⁵ The annual come-together of all Bali citizens to honour their forbears and celebrate their culture.

³⁶ The village head's insignia that symbolizes power.

³⁷ A form of ululation

Mundam's audio tapes. When his tapes came to the limelight it marked the beginning of new forms of communication. Mundam's tapes acted like the launch pad for the dissemination of oral traditional materials beyond the frontiers of the village from the early seventies to the late eighties. Prior to this, they were used for recording music made and sold in the big cities of Bamenda, Bafoussam, Douala and Yaounde. Now in the village, Pa Mundam uses them to record important messages for mass consumption to those at home and abroad.

Background Information/Literature Review

Bali Nyonga is a village situated in the North West Province of Cameroon. It has a population of over 85,000 inhabitants. One of the historical landmarks of this village is that it was once the bastion for German missionaries before the First World War. According to (Jeffreys 1957; Nyamndi 1988; Fokwang 2009), the original inhabitants of this village migrated from the North of Cameroon. As a clan of the Chamba people, they were being led during these migratory journeys to their present site by Gawolbe who was the grandfather of their first king, Galega I. On their way to this present site they won many battles in Yoko and Ngambe but faced a fierce battle in Bamun. From then on they forced their way through Bagam, then to Bamendjinda, Babaju passing through Bamenda, Bafreng, Bande, Bafut and Bameta. By the time they arrived their present site their most revered king Gawolbe had been killed. They were now split and factions followed sons and daughters of the king to various sites. Bali Nyonga indigenes followed the only daughter of the King, NahNyonga to their present site. Since Chamba customs did not allow for a woman to assume the position of chiefship, they then named her son Galega I to be their first 'Fon' (king) (see Nyamndi 1988).

Studies have been carried out since independence in Africa on the important role of folk culture in the lives of the people. These studies have been in the form of novels, drama, poetry, books and articles. This folk culture mostly called "orature" is used as forms of entertainment and at the same time as satirical pieces to correct the wrongs of the community. A study by Clare A. Ignatowski (2006) titled "Journey of Song: Public life and morality in Cameroon"

examines the plight of a young girl called Maitene struggling with an illegitimate child she got while still unmarried. Unable to fend for herself and the baby, Maitene decided to dump the baby in a local pit latrine. Music is then composed to ridicule her behaviour. This situation happened in Tupuri village situated in the North of Cameroon. It should be mentioned that this community and the Bali Nyonga community in Cameroon tend to use songs and dance as forms of satire to expose some of the ills of society. This study examines the debate on the role of modernity in the lives of a young village girl. Modernity has come with all its trappings of seduction making villagers to abandon their village ways of doing things to imitate what obtains in the West. Young girls nowadays are ridiculed by their peers if they don't appear to follow modern fashion and manners of dressing or having premarital sex. Village customary practices and their way of life in general are looked upon as backward and primitive. Maitene seemed to have been the victim of this unfortunate situation.

Ignatowski (2006) went on to criticize the actions of the elders in the village. Matrimonial obligations in the village of Tupuri are fashioned in such a way that husbands are supposed to remain faithful to their wives and treat them well. This is due in part to the rules of Islam which most of the villagers practice. But the truth is that sometimes some husbands go against this law and are therefore criticized in the songs called "Leelee". Women's songs tend to lament the poor treatment from their husbands. After lamentations, they also extol the pleasures of sex in the songs. Thus, we see that Ignatowski demonstrates how songs are used to humiliate certain individuals in the village as well as praise those who deserve to be praised.

In a similar study by Mugambi (1994), there is much emphasis on the role of women in Ugandan society during the guerrilla and post-guerrilla warfare in that country. Since the village setting is rather far removed from the trappings of modernity, radio songs seem to be the medium to disseminate their message to empower the women:

Uganda as a whole has a primarily oral culture. Being exclusively aural, radio broadcasting more than any other medium of communication unites the entire population as it blurs boundaries between the literate and the non-literate members of the society. (p. 48)

The primary language that is used to reach most especially the non-literate is the 'Luganda'. This is unlike the situation in Cameroon where the private and the government owned radio stations broadcast in English or French since they are the official languages. A segment is reserved sometimes for local languages but most of the time the hosts used those time-slots to translate national, provincial and regional news to the public. In the North West Region of Cameroon where Bali Nyonga is situated, there are more than forty villages with each having its own unique language. Mungaka, the language of the Bali Nyonga people is not understood by its neighbouring villages like Batibo, Bameta, Mankon, Chomba or Pinyin. That is why dissemination of messages through mass media can only be achieved if each village owns its own radio station.

Unlike the Pa Mundam tapes that are sold to villagers, Mugambi (1994) used the radio medium to disseminate his message about the role of the women during the political struggles in Uganda. He found out in his study that there has been considerable silencing of female voices in the village community and that their powers and presence are always limited compared to that of the men. The men take the pride for things that women have contributed. She cites Francis Kyewalyanga who said "man's share in a child's procreation was more essential, [since] from him came the child's soul and its physical features, while the mother's share mainly consisted in bearing the body of the child" (quoted in Mugambi, 1994, p. 52). This is to show that in Uganda, gender disparity weighs heavily on the women than the men as men are more privileged than the women whereas both of them do the same hard work.

In another study by Knighton (2006), he lays emphasis on the role of orality by elders in the village of Karamojong as "performance prayers". Karamoja is the name of the performance that is being used as prayer to safeguard the interest of the land. This is done through the sacrifice of an animal called the Ox. The Ox now stands as a healing symbol for the community. When it is slaughtered, its blood is sprinkled on the chest of participants or those especially in need of spiritual help. The author emphasizes that "this was an annual ceremony to pray for rain and against any problems being encountered" (p. 144). Here, while orality is used for blessing and thanksgiving, it is also used as a means for protection. The villagers

used the Karamoja to pray for peace in the future. This is a community that relies heavily on oral communication to transmit messages to its people. The power of the word becomes so central in their livelihood which the written word would not have accomplished.

Similarly in another study by Mushengyezi (2003) titled “Rethinking indigenous media: rituals, talking drums and orality as public communication in Uganda”, he dramatizes the central role of oral discourse in the lives of the African people:

...dance, music, drama, drums and horns, village criers, orators and storytellers, continue to present themselves as effective channels for disseminating messages in predominantly rural societies where the population tends to be predominantly orate or oral-ate rather than liter-ate. (p. 108)

We live in a community where the modern mass media has permeated every facet of our lives; still there are regions of the world untouched by the effects of modernity. They still rely on traditional forms of communication to transmit messages, warnings, and announcements to its people:

Modern mass media, then, have remained largely inaccessible to the majority of Ugandan communities not just because of the low literacy level, but also because of the lack of hardware, software and supporting infrastructure of computer-accessed communication. Consequently, these media cannot be seen as essential to communication in predominantly rural areas (Mushengyezi 2003:108).

In this study, Mushengyezi (2003) used these traditional forms of communication to show how they are not only disseminating news and other reports to the villagers but they criticize the actions of some villagers who may want to go against the wishes of the majority especially by being unhygienic. Complaints are also brought to the attention of the chief of the village who applies the law accordingly.

From all the studies so far it can be construed that traditional forms of communication in Africa have dual functions: to entertain and to teach. This is definitely what Pa Mundam set out to do in Bali Nyonga. Unlike Pa Mundam’s messages which are geared primarily towards teaching, educating, warning and criticizing the actions of elders both young and old in the villages, these other studies highlight

mostly the role traditional forms of communication play to unite and bring peace to the village which the modern mass media could not do. Therefore, in order to examine critically the messages of Pa Mundam in the tapes that are disseminated to residents of Bali and those living in the cities of Bamenda, Douala, Yaounde et al., two research questions have been posed for this study:

RQ1: What specific themes are contained in the audio tapes of Pa Mundam?

RQ 2: What relationships (if any) do the animal symbols in the messages of Pa Mundam have with the Bali Nyonga citizens?

In order to fully answer these questions the Afrocentric theory and methodology have been employed to examine the oral discourse. Asante (1987) defines Afrocentricity as “the most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the centre of his or her existence...” (p. 125). The reason why this study uses Afrocentricity as the theory and method is to situate the value and importance of African discourse within its primary continental cultural context devoid of western influence. Asante again buttresses my argument of using Afrocentricity:

An Afrocentric method is concerned with establishing a world view about the writing and speaking of oppressed people. Current literary theories-phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structuralism, for example-cannot be applied, whole cloth, to African themes and subjects. Based as they are on Eurocentric philosophy, they fail to come to terms with fundamental cultural differences. (p. 159)

Eurocentric theories are not holistic. They do not reflect themes and subjects rooted in African cosmology. Pa Mundam’s discourse have been conceived, framed and executed for a primary audience and that audience being the African in a given village setting similar to that of the people of Bali Nyonga. Pa Mundam’s oratory is for the marginalized villagers who are victims of their own environments. He uses most of the characteristics of ‘nommo’ the power of the spoken word to demonstrate his skills of mastering the socio-cultural climate in Bali Nyonga. His language is filled with repetition, call and response, rhetorical questions, sighs, and above all he intersperses his discourse with folk music that act like transition to the next theme. This is typical of the orator in the village setting in Africa. Music seems to accentuate and reinforce his message.

The discourse has been recorded on audio tapes and was transcribed using Straus and Corbin (1990) method of line-by-line analysis to ascertain the various themes embedded in the discourse. The messages have been divided into part I and 2 because of its extraordinary lengths and the topics covered.

Analysis

Part 1 (Theme of Wisdom)

Pa Mundam uses the symbol of the domestic bird (chicken) to compare and contrast the wisdom of man with that of the animal. In a vitriolic tone to compare the actions of humans with that of chickens, he says that humans should learn wisdom from chickens because god created them with “long beaks” and “two eyes at the centre of their heads” so that they can be more vigilant. We humans are unintelligent and so we should imitate the chickens:

They are wiser than us. We eat without sifting like the chicken. We eat dirt, We drink without sifting, drinking dirt, we eat without washing our hands. The chicken, if you look at the chicken, The chicken knows more than us. He knows, the owner who comes to feed him, comes and throws corn ears, the chicken sees the corn coming down the palms of the owner. When they fall on the ground, he picks but doesn't swallow. He shakes and shakes, shakes before swallowing. Because he does not want to swallow dirt attached to the ear of the corn. He also does this to find out whether when the owner was throwing the corn, he tied a rope on one of them to trap him on his neck.(Pa Mundam)

This kind of God-given intelligence is what humans are supposed to learn from chickens. The repetition on the discourse “shakes and shakes, shakes before swallowing” is indicative of the fact that this domestic animal is ever suspicious of what the human creature is doing with him. This is what locals tend to refer to as the “sixth sense”. But we humans hardly make use of this sixth sense. We pride ourselves for being more intelligent than the animals yet we fall victims everyday:

Why do we eat without shaking our foods, food not meant for us we go ahead and eat because we think that we are strong. Issues not concerning us we enter into it under the pretext that we are strong.

The day of our death we die disgracefully. Some even die with their private parts in pieces. Others are alive but not living. They are partly dead and looking for others to die with them.(Pa Mundam)

Here, Pa Mundam chastises the villagers of Bali Nyonga and humans in general for being proud, arrogant and hypocritical in their ignorance. We think we are wise but underneath, we are hollow, we pretend to be wise and strong but essentially we are weak. His tone is very harsh considering the fact that we have decided to mask ourselves, giving an outward portrayal of ourselves that is a complete opposite within. “Others are alive but not living. They are partly dead and looking for others to die with them”. This is a classic case of pretence, hypocrisy and dishonesty. Right now in Africa, the continent has been ravished by HIV/AIDS and most people have refused to be tested and even those who have been tested are spreading the disease because they do not want to die alone. This is not only selfishness but wickedness. Africa has been praised for its communal life style whereby people live as a community sharing gifts and ideas but now individualism seems to have eclipsed the mind of everyone and it is time according to Pa Mundam for us to imitate the actions of innocent animals to live a much more harmonious life. With the use of rhetorical questions and the power of the spoken word that is evident with African orators, Pa Mundam intercepts his discourse by playing a village lyric known as “Voma”. This is a Bali Nyonga cult related to fertility and the farming cycles. Fochang (2006) gives a brief meaning of Voma cult:

In the olden times when the Bali had only guinea corn as their staple food crop, nobody dared to harvest grain until *Voma kved ngun*³⁸ has performed the ritual by moving around the village putting bundles of grain at people’s gates. This grain...attracts birth spirits. The belief is that during this occasion the Voma weaken the power of any evil forces that may have invaded the land. (Fochang 2006:43).

Its presence instils fear and hope. Pa Mundam uses its lyrics as a transitional device in Part one of his oral discourse in order to pray for a new blessing in the land. The Voma lyric also recalls memories of peace and growth in the village of Bali Nyonga that is noted for obedience, dignity, progress and hope. The chicken imagery in this

³⁸ This means that the Voma cult has inaugurated the harvest season.

first part of the discourse, according to Pa Mundam should serve as the starting point for the healing process in the village. By behaving in like manner like the chicken, we are destined to avoid evil, pretence and hypocrisy in the village.

Part II (The Theme of Greed)

Part II of the oral discourse of Pa Mundam is similar to part I in that he continues his analogy of comparing the villagers to non-human beings. This time he uses the image of the “hawk”. This bird according to the author symbolizes evil. Unlike the chicken that symbolized goodness, the hawk represents something else which unfortunately the Bali Nyonga people have emulated to their detriment:

When the hawk has flown until he is so tired to catch chickens, so tired to catch chicks, he then starts to eat up his own young ones. The Hawk that is too old starts eating up the young ones that he has given birth to. The same thing, too, happens to us human beings. When somebody who grew up lazy, and was not used to hard work, has become too old to the extent that he can no longer work in the farms, he then starts to consult soothsayers and diviners and deceive his children by squandering their wealth. (Pa Mundam)

According to the author, the villagers are a direct replica of this bird. He claims that greed has taken over the life of the people to the extent that they have started behaving cannibalistic. Part of this situation is as a result of idleness, poverty, misery, prostitution and lawlessness that have characterized the life in Bali Nyonga. According to Mundam, a key source of this unfortunate trend is unemployment. When young people have no hope for the future, they become like the hawk. So, according to Pa Mundam when they grow up they become lazy. They hang out at *Ntanfoang*³⁹ and consult soothsayers and diviners. The fact that they are not able to work their farms but indulge in witchcraft to kill even their own children is indicative of the cankerworm of evil that has engulfed the land. “If you people look clearly and examine all these people who never go to the farms but remain at home under the pretext that they are guardians of the land” (Pa Mundam). Pa Mundam uses sarcasm to mock at those lazy

³⁹ This is the local daily business and commercial center in the village.

Bali people who stay at home instead of going to the farms. The farm is a very important component of economic life of the Bali man. The fact that they do not have industries in the village to employ people, the only active economic activity is working in the farms. The produce that comes from the farms are consumed and also marketed to traders from the cities of Bamenda and Bafoussam. This is how the people make their living and send their children to schools. So when you have parents that rather sit idly and indulge in unproductive activities like witchcraft as already mentioned, the end result is doom for the village. According to Pa Mundam, these lazy Bali people ascribed to themselves titles like “guardians of the land.” In his discourse, he mocks at them for misunderstanding that title:

Good guidance of the land are those that are in the farms because they know that when grass grows in the farm a stranger will come and take over the land under the pretext that no one owns the piece of land. Good guidance of the land are those who are in the farms placing traps to catch antelopes “*ntsopyam*” (fox) which they will give as present to the head of the village. They will catch a big catch “nguh” (leopard) and bring it to the head of the village and be recognized for their prowess. (Pa Mundam)

Pa Mundam praises farm-goers because they protect the lands by availing themselves with boundary markers. They also make the ‘Fon’⁴⁰ of the village proud as they bring home their catch “*tsopyam*”. These are the people who are neither greedy nor selfish. On the contrary, those who remain at home are greedy and lazy:

How can you stay at home and call yourself land protector or guidance? The person who only stays at home is an impostor, greed. Home-dwellers are flippant. A home-dweller is a thief. Thieves these days are home dwellers. Since there is no other way for him to fend for himself, he will have to employ thieves to steal for him. If they steal a calabash of palm wine, he will take it to the bar to sell. Some of them steal at traditional meetings. I warn all of you attending traditional meetings, don’t ever give a calabash of palm wine to an elder. He sits idly at “Ntanfoang”, and they will bring him hordes of calabash palm wines from traditional meetings for him as gift. But he instead sells them to the palm wine bar tenders. (Pa Mundam)

⁴⁰ The village traditional ruler

One cannot help but enjoy the humour that Pa Mundam creates in his discourse. Here, he is using wit and humour to lambaste the idle villagers who have become skilful at stealing without being called thieves. But to Pa Mundam, these are the daylight thieves because they have no wherewithal to survive. So they take the easy way out. Calabash of palm wine that are solely meant for traditional sacrifices and meetings are then transformed as commercial goods by these lazy home dwellers at Ntanfoang in Bali Nyonga. It should be noted that Pa Mundam uses a combination of holler, call and response, rhetorical questions insinuated in the discourse. For instance “I warn all of you attending traditional meetings, don’t ever give a calabash of palm wine to an elder” (Pa Mundam). All the black Afrocentric characteristics aforementioned are embedded in the “Mungaka”⁴¹ discourse of Pa Mundam. If this sentence was to be rendered face-to-face before the citizens of Bali Nyonga, there would be an uproar of laughter and the response of “ well said” or “go on, continue, we hear you” from the crowd. But this is reflected in the manner in which he renders the discourse. He constantly changes his tone, pitch and volume to reflect this tendency. This is another instance: “They will give him this palm wine and he will sell to pay his *poll tax*”⁴²(Pa Mundam). The idea of selling the palm wine to pay his tax insinuates the struggles of the poor villagers to eke out some money to pay government tax. Since they, more often than not, are unable to pay taxes; when the tax collectors come by, they spin and vamoose into thin air making a fool of the tax collectors. Bali Nyonga people are very used to this type of life in the village. Only the lazy ones like the ones Pa Mundam alludes to in his discourse employ this tactic. This sentence can produce an uncontrollable outburst of laughter from the crowd if Pa Mundam were to deliver this oratory in a western context auditorium before the audience.

Pa Mundam also uses satirical language to mock at the elders of the village who have decided to lord it over everybody simply because they are title holders. To him an elder is supposed to show the example by being a hardworking person himself. The negative

⁴¹ The language of the Bali Nyonga

⁴² Citizens tax

consequences of laziness, greed, pride and arrogance can be felt by an entire family and community:

When you see an elderly man, an elderly man that is really old who is a home-dweller, he dwells at home because he has no more farms. He had taken his farm to Ntangko'o; he is staying at home like this because he has no more bush-farm, because he had taken it to "*Ntanko'o*"⁴³. He now consults talismans. His compound is now in ruins. His compound is in ruins because most of the occupants have died. They died because he knows the cause of their death. The dwellers of his compound have fled because he is the cause of their fleeing. He is also the cause of their sicknesses. (Pa Mundam)

He is the cause of the family woes because he has ruined his fortunes and compromised the future of his children. It should be noted that Bali Nyonga people like many other villages in Cameroon, it is legal to practice polygamy. So when the author refers to children, he is actually implying an entire family of over thirteen children that may include nephews, nieces, and cousins. If the family head has wasted his own hopes and destiny there is no hope for the rest of his family.

Theme of wasted life

Pa Mundam's discourse in this part II ended with the theme of wasted life of village elders. He has taken a special interest in the elders because they are supposed to be the lightning rod for the society. They chart the path for the rest to follow. The ruin of the village can only be attributed to the neglect or nonchalant attitudes of the village elders. The Bali Nyonga society is one that thrives on the hereditary culture. Sons inherit the property of their fathers. So, when an elder is about to give up the ghost he calls his sons together to counsel and select his successor. The successor then takes good care of his father. So even if this successor has journeyed afar, he is expected to come over to take care of his sickness and possibly death. But Pa Mundam is accusing the elders for wrongful conducts and behaviours that may eventually transcend to their death-bed. He counsels the elders in his audio:

⁴³ This is the name of the Bali Nyonga weekly market center

If you were a good father in life when you are sick the successor will have come to your aid so that when you die, you die in his hands. A good successor carries the head of his dying father. His dying father will then tell him the last message. There will be calm in the compound. The kind of compound that you are forced to inherit without the evil of the dead disappearing with him, when you inherit you will have all the ill luck. All the money you had will go towards paying a soothsayer trying to solve the evil in the compound because an evil person was the head of the compound and when he died he left the remnants behind. (Pa Mundam)

In essence what Pa Mundam is insinuating is that when elders of the Bali Nyonga village neglect their duties as family heads and protectors of the land, there is a ripple effect. This ripple effect is felt across the board. Consequently, those who are entrusted the mantle of leadership should act accordingly and be responsible to their deeds because the consequences of neglect are grave. It should be noted that though the primary audience of Pa Mundam's discourse are the citizens of Bali Nyonga, the themes that he discusses in part 1 and II in his tapes go beyond the village level. The issues of traditional forms of communication like orality have far reaching effects in the era of modernization.

Conclusion

The unravelling of the themes in the discourses of Pa Mundam has revealed the importance of unity, harmony and communality that form the hallmark of the African cosmology. These dialogues have revealed the relationship between the animal symbol and the identity construction of the African native. The Bali Nyonga citizens like his African counterpart take their rhythm of daily life from the animal. Pa Mundam has highlighted the importance of imitating the behaviour of the animal life style if humans want to live a fruitful, enduring, enviable life. Humans are hypocritical, pretentious, liars and cheats but animals are not. They face the truth head-on. But humans, using their cognition tend to dodge the truth. Consequently, according to Pa Mundam, we continue to live in a society full of chaos, confusion and disunity which are not typical of the Bali Nyonga society. So his discourse through the techniques of songs,

repetition, satire, innuendos and sarcasm, he has been able to conscientize us to revolutionize ourselves.

Afrocentricity, the theory of placing African mindset at the forefront of any discourse related to Africa has been the driving force in this discussion. Pa Mundam's tapes had messages that were contextualized to the African ontology. A holistic grasp of all its underlying meanings and most importantly the sub-text implications as mentioned in the discussion warranted an understanding of the African cosmology and ontology and these are the hallmarks of Asante's Afrocentricity.

To ascertain the effect of Pa Mundam's tapes on the lives of the Bali people, an ethnographic study with most of the elderly population in the village is recommended. But suffice it to say that most of us who were young at the time the tapes were being circulated in the village have grown up with a relative understanding of the Bali culture like the meaning behind the use of proverbs, sayings, idioms, rituals and the knowledge of certain symbolisms in the village as discussed above.

Chapter Eight

Chieftaincy at the Crossroads: Politics, Society and Customary Reform in Bali Nyonga

Jude Fokwang

On 28 January 2002, the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Mezam Division visited the town of Bali Nyonga on an official tour of his jurisdiction. Judging by the massive turn out and the prestige enjoyed by Fon⁴⁴ Ganyonga III during the occasion, one could be easily driven to guess that he was in sound harmony with his subjects. The visit of a government official such as the SDO's is often accompanied with the full display of state paraphernalia and its symbols of violence. Such visits afford agents of the postcolony to 'improvise' and indulge in the display of 'excess' so characteristic of the postcolony's 'political machinery' (Mbembe 2001). In the case of Bali, the SDO's official visit was enforced by the temporary closure of government and private offices, shops and schools leading to a sort of unofficial public holiday. Pupils and students from both government and private schools all flocked to the parade grounds (popularly known as the Grandstand) where the SDO was scheduled to address the masses. Members of various political parties had put aside their ideological differences, albeit momentarily and emerged in their numbers, ostensibly to show off their relative worth in terms of political supremacy. This scenario captures in a vivid way, the totality of local socio-political relations in Bali – evidenced by the presence of all prominent local actors - the chief and his notables, the mayor, political parties and their local leaders, party militants and ordinary subjects as well as local civil servants. The visit was hailed as a major success and reported in the local press and the government-controlled Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) Bamenda.

⁴⁴ This is the popular grassfields term for chief although there are slight regional variations. In Kom, it is known as *foyn*, in Bafut and Mankon as *fo'* and in Nso' as *nfor*.

Despite this semblance of harmony, the people were displeased that the SDO's visit had been scheduled on the same day as their customary market day, thereby disrupting the normal order of things – namely the complex trading system that derives its time-honoured support from inter-chiefdom commerce.⁴⁵ Owing to the SDO's scheduled visit, the Traditional Council, headed by the chief resolved to bring forward the market date a day earlier. Although the population complied with this rule, they resented the fact that the chief and the Traditional Council were unable to stand up to the SDO in order to protect their interests. Apparently, the market day was poorly attended due to the sudden changes. Many persons I interviewed maintained that the chief and his council should have defended the customary calendar instead of disrupting the people's socio-economic activities. Others blamed the chief for allowing himself to be dictated to by petty government administrators such as the SDO, in contrast to his predecessor, the late Fon Galega II, who had commanded tremendous respect in the entire region – a claim substantiated by an official visit to his palace by the former state president, Ahmadou Ahidjo in May 1971. Although the above incident may appear trivial to an outsider, it should be emphasised that two specific issues were of paramount concern to the people. First, the chief's perceived inability to control the tide of events in his chiefdom which was interpreted by his subjects as a weakness on his part and secondly, it also confirmed the view among the masses that the chief could not protect them from state predation – perhaps, if anything, he was perceived by many as a facilitator of predatory acts by state agents whose interests were at variance with those of ordinary citizens.

The above anecdote reveals profoundly what many scholars have pointed out before – namely, the intercalary position of the African chief, first during the colonial period (Gluckman 1940; Fallers 1960;

⁴⁵ Most chiefdoms in the Bamenda grasslands devote a day during an 8-day week calendar for its market-day. This day tends to rotate according to the traditional calendar of the chiefdom. In many chiefdoms, the day preceding the market day is considered a sacred day or 'kontri Sunday' in common parlance. A successful market day counts on the participation of the local population and to a large extent, on traders from neighbouring towns and villages.

Schapera 1970) as well as in the contemporary era (Fisiy 1995; Jua 1995; Bofo-Arthur 2001; Durham 2002; Fokwang 2005; Gonçalves 2005).⁴⁶ This predicament is well articulated by Peter Geschiere (1993) in his study of chieftaincy in Cameroon when he observes that ‘the present-day position of chiefs is marked by a strong ambivalence, even in areas where their power does have deeper historical roots’ such as in the Cameroon grasslands (Geschiere 1993:152). On the one hand, he argues, they ‘seem to represent “tradition”, but at the same time the State uses them to further “modern” projects.’ Furthermore, although their legitimacy seems to stem from ‘local forms of organisation,’ in reality, they are largely dependent on the modern state. It is this question of legitimacy that captures my imagination and informs the substance of this chapter - that is, the predicament of the chief of Bali in the era of democratisation in Cameroon. Rather than undertake an extensive assessment of the chief’s legitimacy, I am interested in exploring the ways in which the chief has sought to win credibility in the face of dramatic socio-political transformations. I frame my question, drawing on West and Kloeck-Jenson’s (1999) study on chiefs in Mozambique. Conscious of the intercalary position of most African chiefs, which have implicated all of them in histories of extraction and violence, we need to shift our analytical lenses to explorations of the material circumstances of chiefs in the contemporary era. Such a study needs to ask the following crucial questions: what sort of claims for legitimacy are being made by contemporary chiefs, who is persuaded and why (West and Kloeck-Jenson 1999:475)?

In this chapter, I analyse the sort of claims Fon Ganyonga III has made in order to win credibility – particularly in the domains of

⁴⁶ Deborah Durham’s assertion about the chief in Botswana has strong echoes with the predicament of most chiefs in the Cameroon grasslands. She observes that the ‘village chief in postcolonial Botswana is ‘intercalary’ in the widest sense of the term. He is ‘intercalated problematically between uncertain modes of political agency and participation, he is poised between, on the one hand, the electoral politics of the democratic parties, premised on choice, open and fluid memberships, public campaigning and open partisanship, and, on the other hand, the so-called tribal politics of hereditary ascription and status rankings, prejudices, and the forging of an overt near-universal consensus masking covert divisions’ (Durham 2002:142).

custom and politics; and the extent to which he has succeeded or failed to persuade subjects about his positions on a range of issues. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2001 and 2002 in Bali Nyonga – as well as on secondary sources (newspaper publications in particular). My main finding is that the fon's predicament is characterized by deep uncertainties and ambiguity, suggestive to a large extent of similar conditions faced by most traditional leaders in the North West Region of Cameroon. I argue that the chief's positions on a range of issues both within his chieftdom and beyond have led to serious questions about his legitimacy particularly on matters of national politics. On the other hand, he has successfully made and won some credibility through a range of decisive reforms in customary matters particularly with respect to abusive widowhood practices, examined later in this chapter. I conclude that the weight of evidence at my disposal does not in essence oppose the involvement of chief in modern politics. Rather, it points to an opposition against the position assumed by the chief, perceived as having taken sides with an oppressive regime that seeks to prey on the masses. Such a predicament also points to a crisis of the postcolony which continues to perceive of chiefs as vote-brokers even when the masses have overwhelmingly rejected such claims. However, it remains apparent that chiefs can win tremendous support for their leadership by initiating and enforcing reforms in matters of custom. Proactive involvement in customary reform in favour of the masses holds the potential to boost chiefs' legitimacy without necessarily denying them the scope for participation in modern politics. Chiefs who can successfully negotiate these positionalities would have anchored their legitimacy on what Geschiere has termed 'local forms of organisation' rather than on the postcolonial state whose legitimacy remains profoundly in question.

Contested Terrain: Chiefs in Politics

During the 1990s, most African countries experienced what has been termed their 'second independence' (Hyden and Bratton 1992), a period of political upheaval and social transformation that led to the introduction of democratic reforms. In many countries including Cameroon, the process triggered fresh debates about the status and

role of chiefs. In Cameroon, multiparty politics was reintroduced including other reforms aimed at liberalising political space. During this era, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) led by John Fru Ndi emerged as the most powerful opposition party in the country, enjoying popular support in the North West, Western, Littoral and South West provinces.

Soon after the SDF was launched in 1990, Paul Biya, Cameroon's president since 1982, backtracked on a promise he had made earlier in the year specifically to exclude chiefs from active participation in party politics.⁴⁷ Biya's volte-face became apparent in July 1990 when he, as president of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) appointed Ganyonga and the fons of Mankon and Bafut into key positions of the party which had enjoyed monopoly until 1990. According to the appointments, Fon Angwafo III of Mankon became the first Vice National President of the CPDM⁴⁸ and the fons of Bali and Bafut became alternate members of the Central Committee of the party. The Central Committee consists of elite members of the party from all regions of the country and is second in importance to the Political Bureau.

The reintroduction of multiparty democracy offered enormous space for chiefs to play, once again, an important role in local and national politics. The appointment of Ganyonga and the other chiefs immediately raised their political status to the national level. This development also provided a major opportunity for Ganyonga in particular to play a prominent role in regional politics as his father had done in the 1950s during the struggle for independence and later in the 1970s as the divisional president of the only state party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU).

But the chiefs' new status in the CPDM and consequently, their overt participation in party politics triggered critical debate on the

⁴⁷ Cf. *Cameroon Post*, Wednesday September 12-19, 1990 pg. 2

⁴⁸ Fon Angwafo was appointed to replace John Ngu Foncha. Dr Foncha had resigned from his post as vice president of the ruling party for several reasons, one of which concerned the plight of the Anglophone minority population that had joined the former French Cameroon in 1961 to establish a federation composing of two equal states but which suffered an illegal dissolution by Ahmadou Ahidjo, Cameroon's first president (1960-1982) (see the following Le Vine 1963; Welch 1966; Awasom 2000; Mbaku 2004).

role and status of traditional rulers in the new democratic dispensation. Initial reactions to the chiefs' appointment were generally bitter against Paul Biya and the CPDM government. Biya was accused of trying to destroy the powerful chiefs of the grassfields (for whom he allegedly had no respect) by politicising their role. Such views naively assumed that chiefs co-opted into the circles of the ruling party commanded little or no agency. The newly independent and critical press frequently published articles authored by members of the civil society and subjects of the chiefs in which they condemned the fons for allowing themselves to be manipulated by the Biya government. 'By accepting to be dragged into partisan politics,' a columnist argued 'it goes without saying that these fons have abdicated from their roles of impartial referees in the impending multiparty competition expected to begin soon in the country.'⁴⁹ Other critics insisted that Biya had made this move as a strategy to win future votes through the influence of the powerful and respected chiefs of the grassfields. It was assumed that Biya had erroneously perceived the chiefs as vote-brokers on account of their ambiguously assigned roles as 'auxiliaries of the administration'. In line with this assumption, another columnist wondered if it had not 'ever occurred to the CPDM leaders that these fons govern a traditionally democratic people whose thinking cannot be done for them by the fons?'⁵⁰

Cameroon Tribune, the government daily, saw things from a different perspective. It applauded Biya's decision as worthy and decisive, completely in harmony with the spirit of the democratic transition: 'there is nothing more reasonable' it contended 'than giving credit where it is due. Our ancestral custodians should not fight battles to get what is naturally theirs.'⁵¹ In other words, the co-optation of the chiefs into prominent positions in the ruling party was expected to reinforce their influence at the local level rather than undermine it. Consequently two diametrically opposed camps emerged. On the one hand, those who strongly advocated the neutrality (exclusion) of chiefs from party politics, and on the other,

⁴⁹ *Cameroon Post* No. 38 Tuesday July 31-August 7, 1990 pg.1

⁵⁰ *Le Messager* No. 004 of Tuesday August 21 1990 pg.3

⁵¹ *Cameroon Tribune* No. 1012 1990 pg.5

those who argued that chiefs should participate freely in party politics. A few chiefs were at the forefront in support of the view that chiefs should play a leading role in party politics. A leading member of this camp was Fon Angwafo III of Mankon. As the Vice President of the ruling CPDM he was very vocal about the democratic right of chiefs to be actively involved in any party of their choice:

How can you deprive a citizen of involvement in politics simply because he holds a traditional title of Fon? The traditional ruler cannot be excluded from anything - politics, farming, trading, teaching, business and so forth. It is unthinkable to say chiefs should remain neutral in politics.⁵²

This view was supported overtly and indirectly by many chiefs including Ganyonga, who assumed his position as a member of the Central Committee of the CPDM. The Meta chief, fon Teche Mbah II, for instance argued that:

I personally see nothing wrong in supporting a given political party. Since a Fon has the right to participate in politics, he equally has the right to support any party of his choice. Is there anything wrong if we decide to support the CPDM? If we support the CPDM, it is in order to attract development to our areas.⁵³

Not all traditional rulers advocated the view that chiefs should be actively involved in partisan politics. A key opponent was the late fon of Nso, Nga II who argued his case explicitly by addressing a letter to his subjects:

As the Fon of all of you, I have welcomed all shades of political opinion. It has been a most uncomfortable experience for me to observe a split between many a traditional ruler and his people because of political difference. Our history as far as the Fondom is concerned – from our various clichés and proverbs and the role of the Fon – shows that the occupant of the Stool must be non-partisan. I have striven to be so even though this still has not gained the admiration of all of you.⁵⁴

⁵² *The Herald* No. 110 Thursday May 26-29 1994 pg.3

⁵³ *The Herald* No. 574 Friday February 20-22 1998 pg.8

⁵⁴ *Lɛ Messenger*, Vol. II No. 37, October 10, 1992, page 12.

Despite broad opposition to the involvement of chiefs in party politics, many chiefs in the North West Province, including Ganyonga have maintained their positions in the ruling party and have succeeded in co-opting previously reluctant chiefs. Even the current fon of Nso, Mbinglo III has not maintained the views of his predecessor, Nga II, suggestive of chiefs' determination to be part of the postcolony's political machinery regardless of opposition from the masses (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002). As with many chiefs in the grassfields, Ganyonga's involvement in national politics and specifically on the side of the ruling party has brought his political legitimacy into question. It is therefore important to examine how and what kinds of legitimacy is the fon claiming with respect to his involvement in national politics, who is persuaded or not, and why?

Slippery Slopes: Ganyonga III in Local Politics in Bali

The current fon of Bali was crowned on 6 October 1985 following the 'disappearance'⁵⁵ of his father, Fon Galega II (cf. Titanji et al. 1988). On his accession to office, he assumed the regal title, Ganyonga III. Ganyonga studied in Cameroon and Germany where he earned a graduate degree in anthropology shortly before he assumed the office of chief. He lectured Sociology at the *Ecole Normal Supérieure*, a school of the University of Yaounde I at Bambili until 2001 and has since devoted his efforts in the ruling CPDM party as a national politician.

Ganyonga's involvement in local politics has been the subject of much controversy. His claim to legitimacy in the sphere of modern politics can be identified in three broad areas: his abortive bid for the mayoral office in Bali in 1996, his prominence in various associations of chiefs in the grassfields, and his occasional lobby among traditional leaders in support or opposition to the 'Anglophone cause'. As indicated earlier, most of these claims have been rejected by the masses although a sizeable number of supporters sympathise with his predicament. However, the central argument in this chapter is that although Ganyonga is perceived to have failed to provide a

⁵⁵ In the grassfields of Bamenda (Bali included), it is believed that a *fon* never dies. A *fon* is said to have disappeared upon his death. Another metaphor employed to describe this event is that the fon is "missing".

shield for his people against the predatory postcolonial state, he has nevertheless succeeded to articulate some of the concerns of his people and has acted decisively in favour of customary reform.

Since 1990 Bali has been host to competing political interests and personalities. The on-going contest is between two principal parties, the ruling CPDM and the powerful opposition party, the SDF. I have already hinted that the re-introduction of party politics in 1990 served as a strategic entry point for many chiefs who had played a relatively dormant role in local and/or national affairs before this era. Party politics and elections therefore offered a great opportunity for chiefs, not only to participate in the *reinvention* of Cameroon's future per se, but also, to safeguard and enhance their individual and collective interests. Based on my observations and archival data, this contention is as true of other grassfields chiefs as it is of Ganyonga.

Soon after its formation in 1990 the SDF became a very popular party not only in the North West, but also in the Western, Littoral and South West Provinces. It was against this background that Ganyonga was seen, together with the national government, as an obstruction to the wishes of the people. Although he continued to enjoy the support of some of Bali elite and notables, the chances of the CPDM winning future elections in Bali were slim. The first multiparty parliamentary election was held in March 1992. This was boycotted by several opposition parties especially the SDF for want of an independent electoral commission. The SDF and its fellow opposition parties argued that without an independent body to organise and declare the results, the CPDM government would manipulate and outmanoeuvre the opposition by *rigging* – given the CPDM's position as both player and umpire. The SDF's boycott led to a CPDM victory in all 20 parliamentary seats in the North West. Although most of the new parliamentarians were long-standing politicians, the fon of Bali-Kumbat made a fresh entry to parliament, thus opening the way for other traditional rulers to stand as candidates in future elections.

In October 1992 the much-awaited presidential election was held. No election in Cameroon had attracted as much fervour and enthusiasm as this election. Although the CPDM government insisted on organising the election (without an independent electoral

commission) the SDF and other opposition parties decided not to squander this unique opportunity as they had done in March 1992. Given the growing unpopularity of the CPDM, many people anticipated the inevitable demise of Paul Biya. Popular belief is that victory was stolen from Fru Ndi (cf. NDI 1993; Nyamnjoh 1999; Mbaku 2002; Nyamnjoh 2002; Mbaku and Takougang 2004; Takougang 2004). The results showed that Paul Biya, the incumbent, won 39% of the votes, while Fru Ndi of the SDF and Belo Bouba of the UNDP won 35% and 19% respectively. Owing to violent protests in Bamenda and other parts of the North West, where the SDF commanded overwhelming support, a state of emergency was declared in the province which lasted over two months. Fru Ndi was also put under house arrest for declaring himself the president-elect.

This period was extremely precarious for supporters of the CPDM including the much respected fons of the North West Province. Hostile incidents against chiefs were registered in several parts of the province although none was directed at Ganyonga. In Mankon for example, Fon Angwafo was confronted by accusations and threats from his subjects who blacklisted him for complicity with the CPDM administration. These accusations became more grievous during the state of emergency, when on 3 November 1992 hundreds of his alleged subjects stormed his palace to protest against his 'meddling' in partisan politics. Other unidentified protesters burnt down the fon's rest house in Bamenda to register their disillusionment. Popular opposition to Angwafo's militancy has not shaken his faith in the ruling party nor his defence of the right of chiefs to play an open and influential part in party politics (cf. Nyamnjoh 2002; Angwafo 2009).

Elsewhere in the chieftdom of Ndu, soldiers and gendarmes shot and killed six citizens while they protested against the supposedly stolen victory. The fon's silence over the matter provoked the population to accuse him of collaborating with the CPDM and of being an accessory to state repression. Thereafter, subjects began to denounce him publicly and others called him by his name which was interpreted as an open sign of dethronement (Fisiy 1995:55).

According to several schools of thought, the enthusiasm for democratic change in Cameroon was a short-lived experience.

Advocates of this view hold that such enthusiasm petered out 'shortly after the presidential elections of October 1992, when the public was made to understand that democracy is not necessarily having as president the person the majority wants' (Nyamnjoh, 1999:114). But disillusionment also intensified resentment against the CPDM and its local supporters, especially in the Bamenda grassfields where the SDF continued to maintain its dominance over other political parties.

This was evident in the first local government election of January 1996. The election coincided with the promulgation of the revised 1972 Constitution which increased the presidential term to a maximum of two terms consisting of seven years each.⁵⁶ The municipal council election of 1996 was very significant because of the victory registered by the SDF in many municipalities of the North West Province but particularly so in Bali because for the first time, the fon of Bali contested an election with his own subjects.

Ganyonga sought to make use of this opportunity to head the local council by standing as the CPDM candidate for Bali. It was not unusual for a traditional leader to head a local council. Fonyonga II, Ganyonga's grandfather had led the Bali Native Authority during his tenure as fon of Bali. More recently, Galega II had been at the head of the local council during Ahidjo's presidency although it should be pointed out that this was during the one-party era.⁵⁷ Many subjects were against the idea of the fon standing as candidate against another subject. Informants insisted that it was not 'proper' for the fon to compete with a commoner in democratic elections, because if the fon were defeated it would bring dishonour and shame to his status. This view was particularly prominent among CPDM militants. In general, the subjects resented the entire idea of the fon participating overtly in party politics. According to them, although the fon had a democratic

⁵⁶1996 Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Reproduced by the HURCLED Centre.

⁵⁷ After independence, the Bali Native Authority was transformed to the Bali Area Council. The new council included the chiefdoms of Bali Gham, Bawok and Bohsah under the leadership of Galega II. In 1974 a presidential decree reorganised local government in the country. Law No. 74-23 of 5th December 1974 stipulated that the municipal council shall be headed by a municipal administrator appointed by the state. Although legislation governing the operation of local government in Cameroon has been modified since 1990, it still owes much to the 1972 decree.

right to be involved in party politics and to vote for a party of his choice, his overt participation had the risk of ruining his relationship with subjects who supported opposition parties.

What is more, even some members of the CPDM were against Ganyonga's candidacy for the municipal election. The fon's determination to run for the post allegedly provoked chaos within the CPDM constituency of Bali. CPDM militants who opposed his candidature elected their own candidate and excluded the fon from participating. Eventually the CPDM had two contenders for the post of mayor (within the same municipality), the fon and a rival subject. Although the fon emerged as the CPDM's leading candidate, he suffered defeat at the hands of the opposition SDF.⁵⁸ His defeat made him very unpopular as predicted by those who opposed his running for the mayoral office.

After their victory, the local leadership of the SDF in Bali resolved to pay a visit to the fon ostensibly to reassure him of their unalloyed loyalty. Although this was the official policy of the SDF, some of its militants allegedly celebrated the fon's humiliation near the palace ground, much to his displeasure. Other subjects who were opposed to what they perceived as the fon's 'meddling' in party politics supposedly disobeyed instructions from the palace as a mechanism of registering their disenchantment with the fon. Several months after the elections, many informants told me, subjects refused to provide free labour (a form of tribute) to the fon, provoking him to place a temporary ban on all *death celebrations*⁵⁹ until subjects complied with palace demands. Supporters of the fon however, insisted that subjects who failed to provide free labour to the fon did so, not out of political differences or resentment against

⁵⁸ *The Herald* No. 275 Thursday, January 11-14. It is also reported that after the fon's defeat at the polls, some subjects called on him to resign. This was based on allegations that he had threatened to resign if his subjects failed to vote him into the mayoral office. *The Herald* No. 281, Friday, February 02-04, 1996. Pg.3 The fon refuted the newspaper's claims on the grounds that he was misquoted by his opponents who seemed determined to drag his name into mud.

⁵⁹ In Bali, it is customary to celebrate the death of deceased relatives soon after their burial. It is believed that failure to do so may invoke the wrath of the ancestors on the living.

the fon but because those in charge of organising such activities failed to sensitize the masses properly.⁶⁰

The fon's humiliation at the polls is still remembered more than a decade after although the fon has not ventured to run for any political office again since 1996. Nonetheless, he remains deeply involved in the CPDM and chieftdom politics. This has triggered a major debate about the role of chiefs in the democratic era, a controversy worth pursuing in brief through the eyes of subjects who advocate or oppose chiefs' involvement in party politics.

Despite Ganyonga's predicament, a good number of people supported his positions on a range of issues including politics. An informant maintained that the fon had a responsibility to support the ruling party/government because he benefited in many ways from it. As an auxiliary of the government, it was incumbent on him to be obedient and supportive of the party and government policies. In a patronage system such as Cameroon's, the informant observed, the fon owed his job as a lecturer to the Biya government. According to a popular saying, the fon could not dare to bite the finger that had fed him. This was because he also received payment from the government as an 'auxiliary of the administration'. Furthermore, the fact that he was a board member of MIDENO (a government development agency for the North West Province) implied that he ought to show allegiance to the CPDM government.

The above notwithstanding, a majority of my informants resented the fon's overt partisanship. He was accused of showing what was generally perceived to be 'excessive' support for the ruling party by constantly inviting the masses to follow after his political choice because –in his own words, “a good father never misleads his children.”

Most of those who objected to the fon's involvement in party politics did so from the vantage point of custom or tradition. According to them, it was 'uncustomary' for fons to compete for political office with their subjects because, as it were, the fon was 'above' party politics – he was the father of all his subjects, regardless of political inclinations or party of choice. An informant drew a

⁶⁰ Interview with a CPDM militant and supporter of the *fon*, 10 February 2001.

distinction between politics in traditional society and politics in the modern state and concluded that in modern politics, there was little or no respect for tradition or one's status:

Chiefs should not participate in party politics because modern politics is a dirty game. Tradition demands that we should respect our *fon*, but in politics, there is no respect for a person's status or title, so it is not fair for commoners to address the chief in a similar way they would another subject. I have seen common people speaking to our *fon* carelessly and some even insulted him in the face just because of politics.

Others objected to the *fon's* partisanship on the grounds that the political field was impermanent, given that competition for power was a continuous process. One informant wondered about the fate of *fons* who supported the ruling party and their chances of survival if the ruling party lost elections or was replaced at the national level. This, he argued, would bring a lot of dishonour and ridicule to the *fon*. He was referring to Ganyonga's defeat in the local council election of 1996 by the SDF.

More than a decade after the *fon's* abortive run for office, a growing number of people have become less hostile to the *fon's* involvement in party politics although it is premature to interpret this as an indication of their acceptance of his claims to legitimacy in this respect. On the contrary, the masses seem more preoccupied with the 'Anglophone problem' which continues to gain popularity, especially with the failure of the SDF to capture power. Nevertheless, the *fon* has scored major points among his subjects by supporting popular demands for reform in certain customary practices such as abusive widow rites to which I now turn.

Customary Reform

Despite Ganyonga's tenuous claims to legitimacy in the domain of politics, one of his saving graces is his resolve to enforce previously ignored policies that pertain to custom— such as “abusive” widow(er)hood rituals, widely opposed by women and clerics. Ironically, women are still blamed for the continuation of these so-called outmoded rituals precisely because they play a critical role in

enforcing the observance of ritual taboos related to bereavement. Preliminary data from recent fieldwork reveal that there is wide acclaim among the population and Bali subjects in the diaspora for Ganyonga's role in promoting reform on this and related issues.

Opposition to so-called widowhood rituals in Bali have seen a steady increase over the years. Women's groups, human rights activists and in particular, ministers of the main Christian churches in Bali have been at the forefront of the campaign for their eradication. Drawing on human rights discourses and particularly those contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Christian notions of propriety, women and church ministers have condemned prevailing widowhood practices as 'abusive' and contrary to the dignity of the person. Determined to influence public opinion on this issue, clerics of various denominations collectively addressed a letter to Ganyonga seeking his intervention.⁶¹

What do these widowhood rituals entail? At this point, I only have preliminary data and can ill-afford a detailed description of the practices. However, it needs to be highlighted that they are broad and varied – partly because they are enforced at the lineage level rather than by a centralised institution.⁶² Generally, these rituals consist of a set of taboos and practices whose intended consequence is the symbolic display of bereavement. Perceived as both polluted and polluting, widow(er)s are forbidden from shaking hands with people, sharing their bed or other household items with anyone. In extreme cases, widows are compelled to sleep on the floor (between the period of loss and burial), forced to dress in black for an entire year, culminating with a ritual bath described by opponents as 'degrading'. Widow(ers), women in particular, are expected to succumb to a regime of compulsive mourning observances, most of which have been described by opponents as obnoxious and senseless. For Ganyonga himself has declared these practices as ill-founded and not constitutive of the "culture" of which he is the recognised custodian or guardian.

⁶¹ See Letter of clergymen in Bali entitled 'Condemning the practice of Widowhood in Bali Nyonga'

⁶² It has also become evident that residents of Bali tend to be treated differently from their non-resident counterparts.

Responding to the clergymen's letter, Ganyonga reiterated his opposition to abusive widowhood practices and reminded the population of his predecessor's campaign against such customary practices dating to 1979. In a communiqué entitled 'Abolition of Widowhood practices in Bali Nyonga', Ganyonga reassured women and the population of Bali that a ban had been placed on widowhood practices and 'instructed the members of the Traditional Council, the leaders of the various quarters and villages, ... and the Religious leaders of the various Churches to educate the people and to see to it that the mind of the Fon and the Traditional Council is carried out to the letter.'⁶³

Although it remains uncertain to what extent this legislation has been effectively enforced in Bali, activists and most women's associations in Bali applaud Ganyonga's position. Ganyonga's role on this and other aspects of customary reform need further investigation – a new direction which my research on chieftaincy will embrace.

Conclusion

Since 1990, there has been a growing demand for political actors of a new kind in Cameroon. Indeed, the introduction of democratic reforms created conditions for the return of old political actors such as "traditional leaders" into the 'national political scene'. Geschiere anticipated and quite rightly in the early 1990s that 'democratisation and elections might ...offer new chances to old political actors' such as 'customary authorities', but wondered if they had 'retained sufficient prestige to function as vote banks in the new setting' (Geschiere 1993:151). The experience of the fon of Bali analysed in this chapter belies this anticipation. I have argued that although Ganyonga's overt association with the ruling party in the democratic era tended to undermine his popularity at the local level, his relationship with his subjects has not been completely ruined. This is because he has initiated or demonstrated willingness to act on demands for reform in certain domains of custom.

This chapter has examined the kinds of legitimacy claimed by Ganyonga in the democratic era and evaluated the extent to which

⁶³ See Communiqué entitled 'Abolition of Widowhood Practices in Bali Nyonga'

such claims were accommodated, contested or rejected by the people. Ganyonga's case is examined against the assumption that the introduction of democracy provided scope to old political actors to stage a comeback into the national political scene. The return of these actors was predicated on several claims for legitimacy but the weight of evidence demonstrates that such claims by prominent chiefs were contested by the masses because they favoured the idea that chiefs should be neutral in partisan politics.

Ganyonga's major challenge was his inability to effectively influence the course of local events in his chiefdom. One of the ways he tried to accomplish this was by running for the office of mayor in the local council elections of January 1996. Although he failed to secure the post, he rehabilitated himself by posing as the protector of his people in matters of customs by opposing abusive customary practices.

This chapter argues that chiefs can play a role in Cameroon's democracy on condition that they enter the political scene as 'neutral' mediators – a role favoured by the masses but improbable in any political terrain. It is against this background that the traditional leader's predicament should be understood in the context of Cameroon's so-called democratic transition. My case study shows that Ganyonga's claim to legitimacy in the democratic era was contested by the people not because 'chiefs' ought not to participate in the democratic process, but because he was seen to be siding with the state against them. The fact that Ganyonga failed to offer protection to his people, thereby leaving them at the mercy of state predation explains the people's initial hostility against the person of the fon.

It is precisely because of chiefs' involvement in national politics on the side of the ruling party that most chiefs have failed to assert themselves as alternate sites of power (cf. Geschiere 1993). Although by joining the CPDM many chiefs 'felt this was the best way of securing state protection and safeguarding their interests in a context of keen competition and differences along ethnic lines' (Nyamnjoh 2002:14-5), it is clear that most of their claims to legitimacy in this respect were undermined by the masses. For instance, while the state continued to perceive chiefs as vote-brokers in rural areas (Geschiere

1993; Oomen 2000), it is evident that these chiefs failed to live up to this expectation. As ‘auxiliaries’ of the administration, they were expected to play the role of gatekeepers through which the state could capture rural communities (cf. Jua 1995) but Ganyonga’s example in Bali suggests that, far from being a vote-broker, the contemporary traditional leader has actually become part and parcel of the state elite thereby failing to negotiate the desired rural votes on behalf of the state. Proof of this is the fact that the ruling party has failed to win a single election in Bali for more than a decade since the reintroduction of multiparty democracy despite the fon’s tireless militancy in the CPDM. Of course an apparent victory was registered in the council election of 2007 by the CPDM but this was precisely because the SDF’s electoral list was dismissed by body charged with supervising elections.

Ganyonga’s loyalties do not lie with the state alone. While his subjects have contested his claims to certain kinds of legitimacy, they have in turn, accepted others. Ganyonga’s predicament therefore remains ambiguous. It is probable that Ganyonga may win greater support for his leadership by initiating further reforms in the domain of custom or by modifying the tone of his so-called “excessive” support for the ruling party. There is a crying need for reform in such issues as the institution of bride price (undermined and corrupted by capitalist expansion). New reforms could address abusive bride price practices, particularly by families or individuals who seek to address their financial woes through exorbitant bride price demands.

Kehbuma Langmia

This book has shown the worldview of the Bali Nyonga kingdom in the North West region of Cameroon. Through the various research topics examined, attempt has been made to show how social life is organized and lived out by Bali citizens around the world. The historical and comparative analysis of similar situations in the African continent and beyond has triggered another debate about diversity and homogeneity. On one hand, the cultural ethos of the Bali Nyonga people can be categorized as uniquely to the Bali homeland. On the other hand it can be seen that the socio-cultural lifestyle of Bali people has resemblances in other parts of the world. This argument supports the position of left-leaning globalization scholars who believe that we are interconnected in one way or the other to make this world a “global village”. The flip side of that argument is that some of the traditional practices like marriage and widowhood are not being carried out the same way as it was passed on from our forefathers. Or the point made by Babila Fochang in his chapter that the powers of the Voma cult has been greatly curtailed as seen during the Bali–Bawock war. There seems to be a thread of continuity that sustains Bali culture irrespective of outside influence.

Similarly, why has the mighty force of Christianity that enveloped the village in the late 19th century not been able to influence the Balis to completely abandon their traditional ways of worshipping totems, rocks and stones till date? The answer to this question lies in Bali People’s uniqueness while embracing diversity. Globalization as an off shoot of colonization has been unable to eradicate unique cultural practices that define a people. Since globalization and colonization are all foster children of westernization which by and large celebrates top-bottom approach to civilization and modernization, there is little room for them to have universal impact on the life of all people in the developing world. That is why some of these cultural traits like Voma and Lela have survived the tidal wave of westernization. Voma, Lela, Marriages, Widowhood, Divinity, Bali Chieftaincy,

Traditional Music played prominent role in the ontological life of Bali Nyonga people during the pre-colonial period. They began to have elements of modernization during the colonial period and now during the postcolonial period the forces of globalization are threatening these institutions with relative success. The apparent fear is what will happen 50 years from today with technology almost taking root in all aspects of our lives?

Some Bali traditional practitioners have been educated in the West or have been exposed to some form of western education. Still, some elements of these cultural institutions are being upheld. What will happen 50 years from today is any body's guess. But suffice it to say hereditary practices in Bali are made in such a way that most of these cultural mores are passed on to the heir. Those heirs who are resident in the homeland take on daily tasks similar to the departed but the heirs that are resident in the diaspora visit the village once or twice annually to perform duties relevant to their status in the homeland. Others have kept regents at home to represent them on their behalf. The method that heirs abroad get into contact with folks back home is through the electronic media which is the subject of Patience Fielding's chapter and Lilian Ndangam Fokwang. Maybe that is where Bali Nyonga culture will be conducted 50 years from now.

The asynchronous electronic communication that Bali Nyonga people carry on at home and abroad is through the Internet. As discussed in the section Bali Online, the head of the Kingdom, HRH, Ganyonga III uses this forum to interact with citizens outside the borders of the homeland. This has now become the new public sphere. It is also here that Bali News Brief about events in the village is being transmitted. Financial transactions are being carried out using paypal, Visa card, American Express and Master Card. It is also here as Fielding argues that attempts are being made to communicate using the "Mungaka Language". But the problem is that since only a handful of Balis were taught how to write Mungaka, the overwhelming majority only use the "Queen's" language to communicate. With this and the use of modern means of money transfer and getting daily news about the village through the use of technology, there is the impression that pre-colonial traditional

practices in Bali as evidenced in the discussions of Babila Fochang, Babila Mutia, Evelyn Mecaly, Vincent Nwana and Elias Nwana may fade away in the next 50 years or assume new forms.

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Notes on Contributors

Patience Fielding is a Ph.D. candidate and Eugene Cota Robles Fellow in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, at Berkeley. Her interests include literacy development in the context of digital technologies and globalization, International and Global Education, and Literacy and Human Rights.

As a Government Affairs fellow with Hewlett-Packard, Ms Fielding examined the ways in emerging technologies could be used to enhance classroom teaching and learning processes. “In Rights to Literacy: An Examination of Child Workers in Cameroon”, (forthcoming). Ms. Fielding focuses on youth workers and school drop outs to highlight how these adolescents view and understand their rights and access to education and formal schooling. In her current project, “Gendered Perspectives and Higher Education”, Ms Fielding investigates how gender, higher education and globalization intersect in contemporary Africa. Focusing on women in the sciences and engineering, she examines the various constructions and framings of gender in the competing discourses on education and development in the light of scholarship on language, power, identity, and representation.

Ms Fielding currently lives in Berkeley, California and enjoys exploring the wonderful Northern California beaches and San Francisco restaurants with her family and takes yearly trips to Disneyland to stay connected with her inner child.

Babila Fochang, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon first trained and practised as a carpenter before entering the pastoral ministry. Ordained on 14th December, 1994, he has served as parish pastor in various parishes including Nsimeyong in Yaounde (1994 – 1998); Chaplain of the University of Dschang (2000 – 2002) and Chaplain of CCAST Complex Bambili (2002 - 2003). While in Yaounde together with Peter Esoka he co-produced and co-presented the popular CRTV programme ‘Reflections.’ Rev. Fochang has been Lecturer at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary Kumba since 2005 where he has functioned as School Librarian

(2005 – 2009); Director of Academic Affairs (2006 – 2009) and Registrar (2008 – 2009). Rev. Fochang holds a Master of Theology in African Christianity from the University of KwaZulu Natal (2004) where he is presently working on his PhD thesis in African Theology. His areas of interest are African Christianity, African Theology and African Traditional Religions, areas in which he has published both locally and internationally in magazines and book chapters. He has presented papers in these areas in Cameroon and in Germany. Rev. Fochang is married to Becky Kakhubad Fochang and they are blessed with a son.

Jude Fokwang received his PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology from the University of Toronto and his MA from the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Between 2008 and 2009, he held the position of senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town. He now teaches socio-cultural anthropology at the Orillia Campus of Lakehead University. Fokwang is the author of *Mediating Legitimacy* (2009), a comparative study on traditional leadership and democratisation in Africa. He has published extensively on youth activism, popular culture and citizenship in Africa. He is currently writing an ethnography on young people and “associational life” in the Cameroon Grasslands.

Lilian Ndamang Fokwang is Program Coordinator for the African Canadian Social Development Council (ACSDC) Toronto. She is also a Research Assistant for the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in Toronto where she assisted with coordinating WACC’s flagship project - the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010. She holds a BSc in Journalism and Mass communication from the University of Buea (Cameroon) an MA in Communication Studies from the University of Leeds (United Kingdom) and a PhD in Journalism Studies from the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom). Her research interests include gender and the media, online media and journalism, online networks and media ethics. As an Andrew Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Rhodes University (South Africa) she researched and published on news publishing online in Africa and journalism ethics in Cameroon. She was co-director of the African Media Development Initiatives (AMDI) research in the Southern Africa region – a BBC World

Service Trust funded research project undertaken in 17 African countries. Whilst at Rhodes University, she also served on the board of Highway Africa, and on the editorial board of *Rhodes Journalism Review* and was part of the Highway Africa News Agency team to cover the World Summit on Information Society, (WSIS) in Tunis, Tunisia. While in South Africa, she reported for *Grocott's Mail* – an independent community newspaper in Grahamstown, South Africa. She is also a freelance feature writer for *Mt. Cameroon Magazine* in Canada.

Kehbuma Langmia, Assistant Professor of Communications, teaches research and other media related courses in the Department of Communications, Bowie State University. A graduate from the Television and Film Academy in Munich, Germany, Dr. Langmia has extensive knowledge and training in media productions and management. After earning his Ph.D. in Mass Communication and Media Studies from Howard University in 2006, he has written and published fiction and non-fiction books, book chapters and research articles in prominent national and international journals. They include: *An Evil Meal of Evil* (Michigan State University Press, 2009), *Minorities and Video Production* (Kendall Hunt publishers, 2008); *The Internet and The Construction of the Immigrant Public Sphere: The Case of the Cameroonian Diaspora* (University Press of America, 2007). *Titabet and Takumbeng* (Michigan State University Press, 2008); “Harnessing the power of African Traditional and Modern Media Systems to Avert Conflicts in Africa”, a book chapter in *Communication in an era of global conflict* (University Press of America, 2009). His research articles have been published in the International Journal of Economic Development - Using ICT, 2006, Benton Foundation Social Science Research Council (2006) and the *Journal of Black Studies* (2007). His most recent co-edited book media and technology in emerging African democracies (University Press of America, 2010) is being used by graduate students in some North American universities.

Bejemiah Mecaly holds a BA in English from the University of Yaoundé I and a post-graduate diploma in English studies from the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Yaoundé. As a researcher specializing in ethnography and oral studies, she has conducted fieldwork on Bali-

Nyonga divination systems. She is currently teaching English language and literature at the Government High School Batibo, in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Babila Mutia teaches African oral and written literatures, creative writing, ethnography, and research methodology at the University of Yaoundé I. He has been a visiting Fulbright scholar in Western Washington University, Bellingham, USA (1996/97); visiting professor of African literature and Ethnology, Universität Bayreuth, Germany (2000/01); and visiting professor of African Literature and Creative Writing in Dickinson College, PA, USA (2003/04). He is the author of "Performer, Audience, and Performance Context of Bakweri Pregnancy Rituals and Incantations." *Cahiers d'Études africain* (2005). Vol XLV (1) №.177; "Meaning in Character." *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a 'Post'-Colonial World* (2004). Ed. Geoffrey V. Davis et al. New York. "Stylistic Patterns in Oral Literature: The Form and Structure of Bakweri Dirges." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (2003). Vol.12. №. 3; "Birth Customs, Rituals, and Naming Ceremonies Incantations Among the Guiders of Cameroon." *Bulletin of the IUAES* (2000). No. 40. Ed. Anna Hohenwart-Gerlachstein & Stefanie Wiesbauer-Hohenwart.

Elias M. Nwana is a retired educationist and sociologist with a long-standing interest in documenting the history and changing cultural patterns of the Bali Nyonga people. He has published several manuscripts and papers on different aspects of Bali Nyonga culture. Educated at the University of Legon, Ghana (BA Hons) and the University of California, Los Angeles, UCLA (M Ed, Ed D), Dr Nwana has had a distinguished career in Education in Cameroon.

Vincent Lebga Nwana is one of a younger generation of Bali Nyonga scholars with a keen interest to preserve and promote Bali-Nyonga culture against a backdrop of ever-increasing global influences on African Culture. He is a Mathematician by training (B.Sc. (Hons), Ph.D) and works as a Manager in a large management consulting firm in London.

"This book does an excellent job of analyzing certain facets of crucial developments in Bali and by extension, contemporary Africa. It crystallizes and presents its findings in persuasive essays, metaphysical reflections and insightful commentaries."

DR JERRY KOMIA DOMATOB ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

"If ever there was a need for a people to establish their claim in the only way that modern day realities have imposed, namely that authorship is the only real and veritable statement of ownership, then this publication has fulfilled that need, and in resounding fashion. For a people that have been imagined, represented, possessed, and spoken for largely by curious 'expatriates' however well-intentioned, this is a refreshing statement of reclaiming and re-owning that which is intrinsic to their cosmology...This publication rejects the much clichéd and facile grain of 'protest' or even 'contest' declarations; rather, it stands on its own merit, its own coherency, and its own ethos and compels others to take notice."

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"There is ample truth in the cliché that those who ignore their cultural values are adrift, but it is also true that uninspired and slavish adherence to age-old values in an increasingly inter-connected world stifles creativity and progress. This book is about change in Bali Nyonga, but it is also about change in a typical postcolonial African setting grappling with a challenging new world reality. The profundity of the scholarship points to the core umbilical connection to the motherland and the understanding that only devoted and genuinely concerned researchers are able to share with such novelty and forthrightness. Anyone who reads this book taps into a reservoir of knowledge about a society facing its challenges with unbridled fortitude."

DR VICTOR N. GOMIA, KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

DR JUDE FOKWANG teaches socio-cultural anthropology at the Orillia Campus of Lakehead University. He has published extensively on youth activism, popular culture and citizenship in Africa.

DR KEHBUMA LANGMIA is Assistant Professor of Communications in the Department of Communications, Bowie State University. He has published extensively, fiction and non-fiction.



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